

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

“THE LORD KNOWS THOSE WHO ARE HIS”

REVELATION 7: THE SEALING OF THE 144,000

THE QUANDARY OF INTERPRETATION

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.”

REVELATION 7.13-14

- ▶ No book in the Bible is more controversial or challenging to interpret than Revelation. Is it literal or symbolic; futurist, historicist, or idealist? Will the rapture of the Church occur before the tribulation, in the middle or at the end of the seven years of “the wrath of the Lamb”? Will it include all believers or only those who are truly looking for the return of Christ and faithfully serving Him?

A CRITICAL WARNING

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

HEBREWS 10.23-25

- ▶ You cannot be ready for the return of Christ if you are not living with anticipation for His return (Luke 21.34-36), if you are not cultivating an abiding relationship in Him (John 15.5-8), and if you are not devoted to prayer, the study of Biblical truth, and “discipleship life” within the context of the community of believers (Hebrews 10.24-25).

A UNIQUE FEATURE

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 TIMOTHY 3.16-17

- ▶ The most Jewish of the Gospels, *Matthew*, has more than 90 Old Testament references and allusions, and the most Jewish of the epistles, *Hebrews*, about 120 Old Testament references; but *Revelation* has almost 300! Therefore, Revelation must be studied and understood in light of Old Testament prophecy and God's purposes for Israel.

THE PASSAGE BEFORE US

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 . . .

REVELATION 7.4-5

- ▶ This passage is one of the most controversial in Revelation. Is it about Israel or the Church? Are the numbers literal or symbolic? Some believe that the Church is the “New Israel” and that these numbers represent the entire Church of all believers in Christ, or that these numbers are too precise to be literal and are therefore representative of the innumerable multitude (v. 9).

- ▶ Remembering that “all Scripture is profitable” (2 Timothy 3.16) and that the Holy Spirit has come to teach us and to testify about Christ (John 14.26; 15.26), there are several things for us to keep in mind so that we can “correctly handle the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2.25):
 - (1) We should read the Scriptures as literal unless there are indications that it is symbolic, poetical, or representative.
 - (2) God’s calling and purposes for Israel are distinct and irrevocable (Romans 11.29) and we should not misappropriate them.
 - (3) “All Scripture *is* profitable” and therefore we should study to understand and apply its truths to our lives.

IMPORTANT DETAILS

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth . . . Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

REVELATION 7.1, 4

- ▶ This continues the events following the breaking of the sixth seal.
- ▶ The “four corners of the earth” is descriptive of the whole earth, reminding us that God sees everyone everywhere.
- ▶ This passage is a clear reference to Israel and its tribes.
- ▶ The “seal of God” and “those who were sealed” are critical details.

A NOTABLE OMISSION

. . . from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

REVELATION 7.8

- ▶ In the Old Testament, Joseph is never listed in any catalogue of the tribes; instead, he is represented by his sons: Manasseh and Ephraim.
- ▶ The tribe of Dan is completely omitted from this list.
- ▶ The reason is clear when we search the Scriptures: In Deuteronomy 29, (vss. 18-21) God pronounced harsh judgment for those who embraced idolatry, of which Dan and Ephraim were egregiously guilty.

CRITICAL LESSONS FOR US

- ▶ **The Seal of God.** The true believer in Christ is sealed with the Holy Spirit, “marked” as truly belonging to Christ (2 Corinthians 1.22; Ephesians 1.13-14), and no longer an object of God’s wrath (Ephesians 2.1-3). The person who is truly born of the Spirit delights in being a child of God (Romans 8.15-16), does not continue to live a sin-oriented life (1 John 3.9) but desires to live a Spirit-led life (Galatians 5.22-25), taking care not to “*grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption*” (Ephesians 4.30).

- **Idolatry.** *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.* (COLOSSIANS 3.5-6) Jesus emphasized that the greatest commandment is to “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*” (MATTHEW 22.37) Anything that captures our attention, desires, passion, or time more than Christ, is idolatry. Idolatry has captured our hearts when we acknowledge God with words and offerings, but have no passion or devotion for Him in our hearts (Isaiah 29.13). Idolatry is connected to greed, lust, and pornography, disqualifying one from the kingdom heaven and designating him for God’s wrath (Ephesians 5.5-6).

- **The Lord Knows.** *Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."* (2 TIMOTHY 2.19)
- Our perception of ourselves is rarely accurate and never compatible with God's perception of us (Jeremiah 17.9). The Lord is on His throne, examining all the ways of both the righteous and ungodly (Psalm 11.4-5). He searches every heart and mind to reward each according to his conduct (Jeremiah 17.10). At this moment, He knows who is here *"with all his heart and mind"* and who has little interest or desire. The Apostle Paul urges us to *"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves."* (2 CORINTHIANS 13.5) **May your life prove that you are a true disciple of Christ (John 15.8).**