

Who Are the 144,000?

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The 144,000--what a mysterious, unique group of people they are! For centuries, people in and out of God's church have wondered and argued about who they are. However, when we look at what the Bible says about them, their identity becomes clear. The Bible explains itself!

The 144,000 have very special qualities; Revelation 7 and 14 mention them as highly favored of God.

They:

- # Are sealed by an angel of God
- # Are specially selected from the tribes of Israel
- # Stand on Mount Zion with "a Lamb"
- # Have the Father's name written on their foreheads
- # Sing a new song no one else can sing
- # Are redeemed from the earth
- # Are called "virgins"
- # Are not defiled with women (false churches)
- # Are considered the firstfruits of God's harvest
- # Are guileless and without fault

What a select group of people! Who are they? Is it possible you could be one of them? Are they all that will be saved or are there others? Will they be in the first resurrection? If so, will there be any others?

We are aware that God will save all Israel (Romans 11:26), and that Christ only lost one of those God gave Him to be apostles (John 17:12). That one, Judas Iscariot, was known ahead of time. We are also assured:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in

Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:16-17)

The Father and the Son are not failures. Their plan is right on schedule. Most of the world will be saved! The question is, "When?" Will most people be saved at the return of Christ, or does the order of resurrections (I Corinthians 15:23; Revelation 20:4-15) allow for a broader time frame for saving the world?

Crunching the Numbers

Before addressing the 144,000 specifically, let's examine some numbers. Why does Luke 12:32 say, "Do not fear, little flock..."? How big does the church need to be?

If God planned to save hundreds of thousands or millions of people in the first resurrection, Acts 2 would have been a wonderful place to start. Christ had died less than two months before; an earthquake had rattled Jerusalem; people physically rose from their graves and walked into town; the veil of the Temple had rent in two, exposing the Holy of Holies; and darkness fell at noon! Then came Pentecost: Tongues of fire appeared, the apostles spoke and people heard in dozens of languages. One would think the whole city would have heard and believed--yet the "best day ever" in the church produced a mere 3,000 converts!

This fledgling church "multiplied greatly" (Acts 6:7, 9:31, 18:10), but Acts 21:20 (KJV) still describes "how many thousands of Jews there are which believe." The church did not need huge auditoriums, for they met in private homes (Romans 16:5, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 2), and they were served worldwide by twelve apostles and a small number of elders. Even considering these small numbers, many fell away from the truth (I John 2:18-20; II Thessalonians 2:3, 7), and many followed false apostles (II Peter 2:1)!

Before the fall of Jerusalem, the true believers who had not yet migrated north fled to Pella. When the curtain came up after the first century, false apostles had syncretized paganism with the truth of God, forming a new and different church. The "little flock" of true Christians had disappeared. Most of those considered to be "Christians"--including many who died as martyrs--must have been syncretized pagans who believed a false gospel. We will see that the first resurrection does not have room to include these martyrs, who, over centuries of persecution, may have numbered in the millions.

How many of those God will save are "firstfruits," and where do they fit? Paul includes himself and the Roman church as firstfruits (Romans 8:23), as does James and the converted Israelites scattered abroad (James 1:18). In Romans 11:4-5, Paul refers to the 7,000 in Elijah's time who had not bowed their knee to Baal, and he uses this number to refer to his own time, saying, "Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace." Perhaps he did not mean exactly 7,000, but his quotation is consistent with the "thousands" we saw earlier.

He then explains that, because of the order of the resurrections, "all Israel will be saved" later, though God had for the present "committed them all to disobedience" (Romans 11:16-26, 32). They are not included with the firstfruits at Christ's return (see I Corinthians 15:23; Revelation 20:5-12).

Hebrews 12:23 addresses the "church of the firstborn," stating that he, Paul, and they, the church, will not receive their reward apart from the biblical heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:40). So the firstfruits, who will rise in the first resurrection, must include the servants of God from the Old Testament along with the converted members of the New Testament church.

There is a curious passage in Deuteronomy 33:2, 17:

The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints; from His right hand came a fiery law for them...He [Joseph] shall push the peoples to the ends of the earth; they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh. (NKJV)

We know God gave the law to millions of Israelites. This prophetic passage about the futures of the tribes of Israel may not "prove" anything about "church" numbers of and by itself. It becomes more interesting, however, when we notice a few clearer passages. Jude, quoting Enoch, writes, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints" (verse 14), meaning that the saints are numbered in the tens of thousands. Song of Songs 5:10 describes the Beloved, a type of Christ, as "chief among ten thousand." These numbers become very significant when we combine them with I Thessalonians 3:13, where Paul says Christ will return with "all His saints."

How Many Firstfruits?

Revelation 14:4 states unequivocally that these 144,000 are "firstfruits to God and to the Lamb." Can God count? If these 144,000 are God's firstfruits, then no one else is included. The firstfruits are exactly 144,000, not one person less or one more! These numbers are consistent with the "thousands" and "tens of thousands" added together from the Old and New Testaments. As Christ says, "Many are called, but few chosen" (Matthew 20:16).

The bride of Christ is also exactly 144,000. Revelation 21:2 describes the bride as "the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." At this point, she has risen to meet Jesus Christ, married Him and is coming back to rule on the earth with Him (Revelation 5:10). She will always be with Him from this time on (I Thessalonians 4:17). This occurs at the last trumpet (I Corinthians 15:50-52), the time of the resurrection of the "dead in Christ" along with those who are "alive and remain." (I Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Revelation 21 goes on to describe the bride further, beginning in verse 9: "Then one of the seven angels...talked with me, saying, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's

wife." The angel refers to her as "the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God" (verse 10).

He then describes her dimensions: Her wall is pierced by twelve gates--each a great pearl--having the names of the twelve tribes of Israel inscribed on them and twelve angels at them (verses 12, 21). Her twelve foundations, adorned with precious stones, are each named after the twelve apostles (verses 14, 19-20). New Jerusalem is 12,000 furlongs in length, breadth and height (verse 16). Her wall measures 144 cubits (verse 17).

Twelve tribes times 12,000 each is 144,000, just as John describes the sealed servants of God in Revelation 7! Twelve and the square of twelve is New Jerusalem's description! The bride is exactly 144,000, and the firstfruits are exactly 144,000 (Revelation 14:4).

More Details

Now let us add further detail about the 144,000, beginning in Revelation 14:1, where they are shown on Mount Zion with Christ, the Lamb of God. They have risen to meet Him and descended with Him to the earth to be with and rule with Him forever. They are the first resurrection.

They sing a new song that, emphatically, not one other person can sing (verse 3). If there are to be others resurrected in the first resurrection in some other category, such as "guests," what a letdown that would be! They could not be the bride, they could not even sing with her! (The "guests at the wedding" in Matthew 22:1-14 actually refers to those who make up the bride, not "others" besides the 144,000 who will be in the first resurrection. The real guests honoring the bride and Groom are listed in Revelation 5:11: many angels, living creatures and elders!)

The 144,000 are called "virgins" (Revelation 14:4). Some have seriously thought these are people who never had sexual intercourse! II Corinthians 11:2, however, supplies a more satisfying answer. The Corinthians had come out of as sexually active and perverted a culture as any in history, but Paul says that his goal was to present them "as a chaste virgin to Christ." Ephesians 5:24-26 shows the people of the church, defiled by sin, becoming unspotted, unwrinkled, holy and without blemish. Similarly, using Israel as a type, Ezekiel 16:9 shows Christ cleaning up His bride. Cleansed sinners comprise the 144,000, and they are designated "virgin." There is hope for all of us!

These are the "redeemed from the earth" (Revelation 14:3-4). The Bible uses the name "redeemed" to describe those whom Christ's blood delivers from sin, purchasing them from death (Hebrews 9:12-16).

Since these are the only ones who can sing the new song, they are the only ones redeemed from the earth at that time. Any others who are saved must be saved later. They "follow Christ" everywhere, being the bride with her Husband, ruling on earth.

Are the 144,000 all males, as some have postulated? Paul refers to the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 as being part of the firstfruits (Hebrews 12:22-23; 11:40). Paul lists Sarah and Rahab as firstfruits awaiting resurrection when Christ returns! "Not defiled with women" cannot mean they are all men. The Bible often refers to churches as "women." Thus, the figure of speech means the 144,000 are not spiritually defiled with false doctrine.

Revelation 14:5 shows that the judgment of the 144,000 is complete; they have already "passed under the rod." Judgment is now on the house of spiritual Israel (I Peter 4:17). Christ comes back to reward the prophets and saints; their judgment will have been decided by the time He returns and changes them "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (I Corinthians 15:52). He will sit in judgment only of those remaining alive (Revelation 11:18; 20:4-5).

One Group or Two?

Some contend that there are two groups of 144,000, one in Revelation 14, the other in chapter 7.

Apparently, the idea is that the ones in chapter 7 are physical Israelites that are the seed of physical government for the Millennium, and the 144,000 in chapter 14 are the bride, the firstfruits, the elect of God.

First, we must ask why God would see a need for physical rulers when He has prepared 144,000 humans-turned-spirit beings to rule as kings and priests? Isaiah 30:21 shows that they will be visible and audible to humans.

We can ascertain the truth of the matter simply by defining the "sealing" of those in Revelation 7. We will see that sealing has to do with protecting and setting aside for special use.

In II Corinthians 1:22, Paul describes himself and the spiritual Israelites, the church, as being "sealed...and given...the spirit in our hearts as a deposit" (see also II Corinthians 5:5). In a real estate transaction, earnest or "sincerity and serious intent" money is put down ahead of time. If the buyer fails to finish the purchase, he loses the money. Spiritually, God gives us "earnest money" in the form of the Holy Spirit. He buys, redeems or purchases us with Christ's blood, which seals us or designates us as His. The Holy Spirit and the mind of Christ in us are the evidence of this, recognizable to Him and others. God completes the transaction when He returns and changes us into spirit as members of the God Family and co-heirs with Christ (John 3:6; I Corinthians 15:42-55).

Ephesians 1:13-14 combines sealing, as in Revelation 7, with redemption, a characteristic of the 144,000 of Revelation 14:

In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is

the guarantee [earnest, KJV, NKJV margin] of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

Here, sealed, earnest, redemption and purchase are all included in one passage, showing they are inseparable! There is only one group of 144,000!

Ephesians 4:30 makes the same connection, showing we are "sealed [protected, set aside or apart] for the day of redemption" by the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 9:11-15 shows the redemption from our sins is of Christ so that we can "receive the promise of eternal inheritance," which occurs at the return of Christ (Luke 21:27-28).

The time element of Revelation 7 is the sixth seal and the day of Christ's wrath (Revelation 6:12-17).

The angels are instructed to hold back opening the seventh seal and seven last plagues until the sealing of the 144,000 is complete (7:1-3). The last two to be sealed, set aside, given the final stamp of approval may be the Two Witnesses, who die only three-and-a-half days before Christ returns. God resurrects them to meet Christ in the air with the 143,998 others who form the bride and government of Christ, the mother for the rest of humanity, who will then have the opportunity for salvation in their order.

The sealing is not just physical protection of 144,000 physical Israelites. The Bible clearly defines sealing as being of the Holy Spirit of promise toward inheritance of the promises. This includes the patriarchs and all true Christians right until Christ returns. Notice they are called "the servants of our God" (Revelation 7:3). God does not use this term lightly in the Bible. Could we legitimately classify 144,000 people who had just endured the Tribulation because of sin, barely surviving and not yet converted, "servants of our God?"

Those who survive into the Millennium will be humbled and ready to become converted, not already converted and ready to rule. That opportunity is reserved for those who have already proved themselves worthy to rule, servants of God, the firstfruits.

Why are they numbered by tribe? Because the apostles rule over the twelve tribes (Matthew 19:28), and as we saw in Revelation 21, twelve is the governmental number of the bride. Whether we are physically of Judah, Gad, Asher or whatever is not important. Very likely, God places us spiritually in those tribes as He organizes His government.

We know this because the twelve apostles were not all physically from the tribes they will rule! They were apparently mostly of Judah, Levi or Benjamin. Since there were several sets of brothers among the Twelve, it is impossible that all twelve tribes could physically be represented, so Christ will place them over whichever tribe He chooses. He will do the same with us.

Gentiles Included

Gentiles will also be included in the 144,000! They are grafted in as spiritual Israelites (Romans 11), and therefore placed in a particular tribe based on their abilities as God desires. Paul includes Gentiles in Hebrews 11, just as he includes the members of the Gentile churches as firstfruits (I Corinthians 15:23, 51-52; Romans 16:4-5)!

The church in Colosse was Gentile, and Paul ties their redemption to the rest of the church and Christ (Colossians 1:14-18). Ephesians 2:11-22 makes it irrefutable that he includes the Gentiles as fellow citizens, part of the "holy temple" and the "habitation of God." Once grafted in, Gentiles are spiritual Israelites, and Christ grafts them in where they fit best among the tribes.

Gentiles are sealed, redeemed, saved and receive the inheritance equally with blood Israelites if they have become spiritual Israelites. There is no difference. They are among the 144,000.

The definition, description and circumstances of the 144,000 of Revelation 7 and 14 show them to be inextricably entwined. They are the same. They are "signed, sealed and delivered" by the time Christ returns and reckoned as without guile and faultless through God's work in them to produce His holy character.