

## Revelation Bible Study #35

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

### Revelation 14:1-5

**1** Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. **2** And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, **3** and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. **4** It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, **5** and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

### Introduction

Over the course of this vision,<sup>1</sup> St. John has focused on the activities of the Church's *enemies*. The devil, presented as the sign of a dragon; the world, presented as a beast from the sea; and false teachers, presented as a beast from the earth. The devil persecutes the Church directly until she is safely in the confines of the wilderness. The world puts persecutory pressure on the Church, both with violence and social pressure. The false teachers attempt to funnel believers into the world's belief systems, especially by utilizing false christs, false qualifications, and cooperation with the world to get rid of those who will not go along. It is no exaggeration to say that the tone of the twelfth and thirteenth chapters is *dour* – and this is by design, as St. John has explicitly said that it is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.<sup>2</sup>

Starting in the fourteenth chapter, the focus *shifts* to our Lord and all who belong to Him. This includes a return of discussion on the angels, the living creatures, the 144,000, and the Church at large. The situation which is inflicted on the Church cannot hold forever; God shall not permit it to go on in perpetuity, lest the Body of Christ be extinguished. Eventually, the upward spiral of cosmic history culminates in a final deliverance of the saints away from the chief enemies which have assailed them for centuries. This begins with a new and distinct “144,000.”

### Vs.1

**1** Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

The phrases “then I looked” and “then I looked, and behold” are prominent in only three books of Scripture: Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation.<sup>3</sup> In each instance, the prophetic writer is remarking on something he sees in the middle of a vision, effectively using the phrase as a kind of tone-changing punctuation. This is important to note, as it tells us that St. John is still recounting the details of this particular vision, which began in the twelfth chapter; we are thus charged with maintaining the same hermeneutic rule introduced in Revelation 12:1, that we are speaking of *signs*. The 144,000 are thus to be interpreted as symbolic.

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<sup>1</sup> That is, the vision which begins in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 13:10

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 8:2, 10:1, Daniel 7:4, 12:5, Revelation 14:1, 14:14 to name a few.

Naturally, there will be a temptation to claim that this is the same 144,000 from the seventh chapter.<sup>4</sup> The differences between the groups are enough to make such a position untenable. The latter crowd is not enumerated according to any tribal identity, and they have the Names of the Father and the Son *written* on their foreheads, as opposed to awaiting a seal from angels. This is because the latter group pertains to the *New Covenant*, while the previous 144,000 was an approximation of the Old Covenant saints. On account of the New Covenant, the seal placed on this second group is not done by angels, but by the Holy Spirit upon receiving Baptism. The Names of the Father and Son are on their foreheads, and we may wonder why the Holy Spirit's Name is not present; this is because He is the one who so sealed them.<sup>5</sup>

The “Mount Zion” to which St. John refers is not the physical mountain here on earth, but the same Heavenly Jerusalem that the author of Hebrews writes about.<sup>6</sup> They are gathered there, at least in spirit, as witnesses of our Lord's faithfulness. The mark of the beast must be countered by a *separate* sealing and mark, namely that of union with Christ and regeneration. If a believer belongs to our Lord, he is considered as being on Mount Zion, a well-fortified and protected place.

### Vs.2-3

2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, 3 and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.

The “roar of many waters” further differentiates the latter crowd of 144,000 from the previous group. Isaiah and Jeremiah both proclaim that *hostile* groups of Gentiles have a roar as many waters, groups that are to be judged.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Ezekiel says that God's Glory and the cherubim sound like many waters;<sup>8</sup> St. John concurs with the sound as one particularly made by Christ as He speaks.<sup>9</sup> We understand that these “harpists” are the same as the 144,000 mentioned here, as St. John identifies them later as “those who had conquered the beast and its image.”<sup>10</sup> But before he tells us this, it is hinted by the sound of waters. If the reader is a student of the Old Testament, he recognizes that the previous prophetic use of the term – both in Isaiah and Jeremiah's hostile sense and in Ezekiel's celestial sense – means that this latter group is comprised almost exclusively of sanctified Gentiles. They sound like many waters because that is how their crowds sounded on earth; but they sound like *thunder* and roaring waters, because they have been delivered from death and into glory.

In Revelation 7, there is a sense that the number 144,000 suggests a certain *smallness* regarding the number of Old Covenant saints. This is on account of the vast multitude of Gentile saints which take up a shout of praise after they are shown.<sup>11</sup> The comparison is easily understood. However, *here* the number 144,000 suggests the smallness of the Church in comparison with the rest of humanity, which has by and large taken the mark of the beast. While their actual number is in the hundreds of millions, St. John sees this sign as a means of establishing unity between Old and New Covenant believers, who both faced being horribly outnumbered by pagans during their respective eras. St. John is verifying by his vision the words that Christ spoke to him on earth, that the gate is narrow which

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4 Revelation 7:1-8

5 Ephesians 1:13, Acts 2:38

6 Hebrews 12:22

7 Isaiah 17:12-14, Jeremiah 51:55

8 Ezekiel 1:24, 43:2

9 Revelation 1:5

10 Revelation 15:2. As we shall see in a later lesson, the fifteenth chapter is more or less a recapitulation of this period.

11 Revelation 7:9-10

leads to life, and few find it.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Vs.4-5**

4 It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

Scripture is not positing here that only virgin males compose the multitude of New Testament saints. Nor is it saying that they were *physically* virgins. On the one hand, the symbolism of virginity means that they have not committed (or are not counted as having committed) spiritual harlotry – that is, idolatry; since the Church, the bride of Christ, is declared pure by justification and made pure by regeneration, the believers which comprise her are counted as being unstained by spiritual fornication. This is in contrast to Israel under the Old Covenant, which wantonly played the harlot with false gods.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, these are explicitly *men*, as opposed to the Old Testament comparison of virginity to spiritual faithfulness which always presented Israel as a female. While spiritual faithfulness is certainly emphasized here, another comparison is being made between these faithful saints and the ancient armies of Israel. Deuteronomy 23 outlines that any “emission” in the Israelite army's battle camp resulted in a temporary exclusion of the individual soldier; if he wanted to participate in the war, utmost importance was placed on being ceremonially clean. Israel's army was to be comprised of *holy men*. Christians are expected to stay clean – that is, unstained by the world<sup>14</sup> – in order to continuously participate in the Great Commission. In fact, since they are justified by faith, they are *considered* clean as virgins, despite whatever sins they may have committed.

This dynamic is witnessed with the men who served as David's war-band. When he visited the priests at Nob, David asked for the show bread of the Tabernacle to feed his men; Ahimelech the priest gave only one condition, that they had abstained from “women.”<sup>15</sup> While perhaps it may be a stretch to say that St. John's vision makes this comparison directly, the Church Militant is in the same position as David and his men, always on the move so as to escape persecution while also making the monarchic claim that God has provided; for the Old Testament this was David, but in the Church era it is our Lord Jesus who rightfully claims the Throne.

The show bread is also referred to as the “Bread of the Presence” in Exodus,<sup>16</sup> and by its nature it is typologically connected to the consecrated bread of the Eucharist, by which we receive the Body of our Lord Jesus. It is in this way these 144,000 are always following the Lamb, in that He is constantly leading His Church with His true Presence, both in this world (the Church Militant, corresponding with David's war-band) and in the next (the Church Triumphant, corresponding with virgin attendants).

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12 Matthew 7:13-14

13 Jeremiah 18:13-17, esp. Ezekiel 16

14 James 1:27

15 1 Samuel 21:1-6

16 Exodus 25:30, also in Numbers 4:7