

THE 144,000
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They keep popping up—those 144,000 (Rev. 7, 14)! People are intrigued by them! People ask, “Are they special besides the vast number of earth’s last generation who will be ready when Jesus returns? Are they an elite group? Maybe teachers or guides to the “common people” who will also be “translated”?

We dare not add to what the Bible says. We must take a lowly position in trying to explain who these people are. The Holy Spirit does not stoop to satisfy mere curiosity. But we must think about the character of this special group. Why? It might be possible that the Holy Spirit is right now saying to you or me, “Come” and be one of those 144,000 (see Rev. 22:17, and ponder what it means).

If so, would it be appropriate for us to answer Him, “No, thanks; I want to go to heaven but I don’t want to be in a special group that requires such devotion and self-sacrifice”? Can we refuse ANY invitation the Holy Spirit may bring to us and still be ready when Jesus returns?

Or, in different words, does the Holy Spirit offer us our choice of first or second class tickets? If so, then some dear people would choose second class. They would say, “I don’t want to experience the GREAT devotion of those who ‘follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,’ who stand before the throne of God ‘without fault’ (14:4, 5). That’s too high a standard; I don’t want a great ‘mansion’ in

heaven like the apostle Paul will have-a shack in the Holy City is all I want if I can just squeeze inside the pearly gate” (this idea is the source of widespread “lukewarmness”). Question: are there really first and second class tickets to heaven? Can you say “No!” to the Bridegroom-Lover and still be a “guest at the wedding”?

What makes us uncomfortable to even think about them is that “in their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God” (Rev 14:1-5). No church can hang up a banner, “The 144,000 R Us” like “Toys R Us.” Instead, we realize how faulty we are by nature. And even when we get old, the Holy Spirit helps us remember, “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). Even to read aloud what the Bible says about these mysterious 144,000 is suspected as teaching the heresy of “perfectionism.”

To go on letting ourselves be faulty, indulging in selfishness, being worldly, is as comfortable as wearing an old shoe. Rowing upstream is just too difficult, well, it’s downright impossible, is the idea. “Allah” knows we can’t be “without fault,” so let’s just trust His “compassion” and settle down to stay sinful in character. It’s comforting to notice that’s how everybody else is.

But here those people are back on stage—the fruition of God’s goal for humanity. In spite of countless evil angels, they will “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.” It means Christ as the crucified One has captured their hearts; they “glory in the cross of Christ” (Gal 6:14). They discover a blessed “hunger and thirst for righteousness” that

transcends their natural love for selfish worldly pleasure. You wonder often what a woman sees in a man that she wants to be his wife; well, these people see something in Jesus.

To be alone is something all of us naturally fear. So God's promise is precious: "I will never leave you nor forsake you. So we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man can do to me" (Heb. 13:5, 6). But of course there is a condition: we are not to leave the Lord, nor forsake Him. The context of God's promise is clear: "It is good that the heart be established by grace" (vs. 9). It will always be "by grace" that we know He has not left nor forsaken us. That grace will motivate us to be loyal to Christ even if we must stand alone in doing so. "Jesus . . . suffered [alone] outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach [alone]" (vss. 12, 13). God is not playing with us, refusing to stay with us unless we stay with Him; we don't take the initiative, He does. But it is not fair, well, it's impossible, for us to appreciate or realize the presence of God with us unless we appreciate His grace in saving us from the hell that ultimate loneliness will be. When we appreciate how Jesus suffered for us "alone," we are motivated to be loyal to Him even when it seems we are alone in doing so.

Peter felt himself "alone" that Thursday night warming himself by the fire while Jesus was being scourged inside the court room, so he wanted to be considered "in" with the crowd of giddy, thoughtless people. It hurt to be alone. But all of God's people, high or low, have somehow been tested so they can

demonstrate their loyalty to Christ under stress and apparent loneliness. You could never be happy in heaven without that test! It may well be when we come to the closing scenes that God's people will each of stand utterly alone in receiving the seal of God when everybody else appears to be receiving the mark of the beast (see Rev. 13:11-17).

Elijah was alone on Mt Carmel when it seemed everybody else was either worshipping Baal or was too cowardly to stand with him when the test came (1 Kings 18; true, there were "7000" in Israel who had not bowed their knees to Baal, but in that great test not one had the courage to raise his hand to support Elijah). Elijah's great loyalty in loneliness had something to do with the great honor given him in being translated. There will be "144,000" (literal or symbolic is not the issue here) in the end who will be as loyal as he was—not because they are "made of sterner stuff" than the rest of us and are "strong," but because in their weakness they have identified with Jesus as He suffered alone for them.

If Jesus is the Son of God (and yes, He is!), and if He came on an expensive errand to save us (and yes, He did come on such an errand, and the price He paid to save us was infinite!). Then He must have had some "prototype," some example of what He died to accomplish, that He could show to the world to justify His great sacrifice. The Ford Motor Company proposes to build and sell a completely new car that gives 70-80 miles per gallon; they must first build a "prototype," a car that they can demonstrate in a showroom that does that.

Before His death on His cross, Jesus must have some “prototype,” some human being whom He can demonstrate to the world as an example of the salvation FROM sin that He has achieved. And yes, He had such a person—but not one of His twelve disciples. His “prototype” was a basket case woman who had fallen so low that she is described as being possessed by “seven devils”—the lady who is famous because she washed His feet with tears (Jn. 12:1-8). Jesus demonstrated her in His “showroom” as the example of a human being who was the “prototype” of the 144,000 paraded in Revelation 14:4 as something “new” never before demonstrated—they “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth, . . . in their mouth . . . no guile, for they are without fault.” Has there ever been even one sinner who can be seen, demonstrated, to prove to the world that such an astounding accomplishment is even possible?

Yes, our hearts are humbled as we “see” one such person, of whom Jesus said words of no other person in all history: “Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she [this woman] hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her” (Mk. 14:9). Wonder of wonders! Jesus at last shares the spotlight with someone else, asks the world not only to “behold” Himself but to look at someone whose story must be told side by side with the Good News of His mission. Amazing!

The great leaders-to-be of Jesus’ church had despised what this woman had “done,” but He put

her on a pedestal and told us all that we can’t proclaim His gospel anywhere, Third, Second, or First worlds, unless we include her story. In other words, the “gospel” must be more than a pie-in-the-sky, after-death transformation of sinners’ lives: the world deserves to “see” first-hand how it has “power” here and now. (And yes, the gospel indicates that this “woman” on the pedestal was molested sexually; and yes, her molester is mentioned in the story also as Luke tells it in 7:37-50).

A fundamental question we must settle is whether God is righteous, and whether He is good. We read in Heb. 6:10 that “God is not unrighteous,” meaning that He is indeed righteous. And we read in Ps. 103 that He is like a father who pities His children, that He is merciful and gracious (vss. 13, 8). Believing who He is must be settled in our hearts, for he who comes to God must believe two things: (1) that He is, that He exists, and (2) that He rewards those who diligently pursue knowing Him (Heb. 11:6). Jesus likened God to a father who gives his children food when they are hungry. “What man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?” Then He went on to explain that our heavenly Father is more kind than any earthly father. That being true, then we must conclude that He is not trying to make it difficult for people to have eternal life in His kingdom. He does not send difficulties and disappointments in order to try to break our confidence in Him, but because we are living in the midst of a great controversy between Christ and Satan, we have to meet trials that

inevitably test our faith. The only way to avoid them would be to go to the grave.

Even Jesus, God's only begotten, beloved Son was forced to meet severe trials, the greatest of which was the experience of feeling forsaken of God while He hung on His cross in the darkness. Meeting strange and bitter trials is not inconsistent with knowing that the Father loves you even as He loves His own Son; there may be even a more understandable realization of God's love in the midst of trials. When every other voice is stilled and you are alone before God wrestling with your trials, your soul may sense the nearness and tender love of Christ more keenly during trials. Peter says, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you; but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings" (Pet. 4:12, 13).

There is an old-fashioned term seldom heard today, "Christian experience." It encompasses the breadth of one's first-hand knowledge of God experienced in sunshine and shadow, trials borne which establish one "in the faith." It's a precious acquirement! It's something no one can take from you, not even Satan. Ask God to give it to you; but remember He can't do so except through giving you "experience" itself. When the "144,000" sing "a new song before the throne" they will not be reading notes in hymn books; John says they "learn that song" (Rev 14:1-3). How? By experience!

Why is it that sometimes God doesn't answer His "phone" when sincere people call Him in prayer?

Why did God let poor Job go through that horrible experience when He Himself had to admit that Job was "a perfect and an upright man" (1:8)? Why did He let David for ten long years be hunted in the wilderness like a wild animal when he was "the anointed of the Lord"? Why, when Jeremiah gave himself for service, did God let him suffer a lifetime of anguish (no restitution ever, like Job had!)? Is God fair?

The story of Job in the Bible is the first book ever written. Of all the 66 books in the Bible, Job is the one that most vividly reveals the problem all of us face in life: how to understand suffering. And that problem always resolves itself finally into one great, perplexing, painful question: who is this who hates me? Who is bringing on me this undeserved calamity? Is it God, or is it Satan? Your mind may have the correct answer, but what about your heart? If you are like I am, your heart in its natural, unconverted state, is "enmity against God" (Rom 8:3), and you're only kidding yourself if you think you are an exception. "Why me?" is the universal question we ask when great calamity strikes us, whether by an accident, or cancer, or loss of a human love, or bereavement. Job is I, and you; he is standing in for us. He couldn't figure out what "sin" he was guilty of that provoked God to curse him so terribly with the loss of everything he held dear, even his basic health. Job is the first Christian book ever written; there are links that bind him on his dung heap wailing out in despair, "Why?" with Christ on His cross in total darkness wailing the same "Why?" God was forced to stake His throne

and the stability of the universe itself on this one poor, weak, human man, Job. God had claimed that Job was true and righteous. Satan ridiculed the idea; he wagered that if God were to permit enormous affliction to come on Job, he would turn traitor and “curse God.” And God couldn’t back out; one human being in supreme wretchedness was holding the line in this great conflict with Satan, and God had to hold His breath in anticipation of what Job would do. Today there are “144,000” individuals of “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” each of whom is so important that he/she is holding that same line all alone, like Job did. And, as with Job, there is a link that binds each one to Christ on His cross asking “Why Me?”

(1) Job was honored to fight alone in the arena like a gladiator, given the job of defending God in His great controversy with Satan. Stupendous: a human being entrusted with that enormous responsibility—defending God! If Job had done what his dear wife said, “Curse God and die!” he would have proved that Satan is right, and forced God into profound embarrassment before the world and the universe. A terrible battle, but God had no choice: let him go it alone, apparently forsaken. (And the “church” of that day, his three friends, made his hell worse). Job was a forerunner of Christ, a tremendous honor.

(2) There had to be a “David” so that when the Son of God became the Son of man He could also be “the son of David.” David had to go through his experiences of feeling forsaken by God so that Christ could later read his psalms and be

strengthened thereby. David “the anointed one” was also a forerunner of Christ. The price? Pain and suffering; but it was worth it.

(3) Jeremiah is now honored as “the greatest of the prophets”; he will have the honor throughout eternity.

(4) God must have “144,000” to honor Him likewise in the last great trials of faith (Rev 7:1-4; 14:1-5). If He has only 143,999, His word will fail and He will be embarrassed in the great controversy with Satan. Perhaps you are that last one who is so important. Hang on.

One of the most basic truths of the Bible is being subtly opposed even in the church: the teaching of the second coming of Jesus.

Not one “saint” will ever enter heaven except via the “first resurrection” (Rev. 20:5, 6; the Bible does not teach that anyone goes to heaven when he dies; each one who dies “sleeps in Jesus,” 1 Thess. 4:15-17). And the resurrection cannot take place until Jesus returns, for only He can raise the dead (Jn. 11:25). Therefore all the billions who have died believing in Jesus for the past 6000 years are prisoners in their graves, locked therein until He returns!

But Jesus CANNOT return until He has a people ready. As long as there is sin still buried in their hearts, even unconscious sin, they would only “be consumed by the brightness of His coming” (2 Thess. 1 and 2. Put a dish of food in your microwave with a metal spoon buried in it).

“Oh, I can never get rid of all sin, conscious or unconscious,” many say. And thus they oppose the

second coming of Jesus. Some say they would rather die than say Goodbye to all sin, hoping they can get to heaven by the “underground route.”

But the Bible makes us uncomfortable, for it plainly declares that God will be successful in preparing a people for Christ’s coming; and they will not be a handful of loners scattered loosely in the wilderness. They will be “144,000 . . . who follow the Lamb wherever He goes, . . . without fault before the throne of God,” “in their mouth . . . no guile” (Rev 14:4, 5). This coordinated, united, corporate “body” of believers will be the ripened “harvest of the earth” that gives that “angel” the cue to declare, “the time is come for Thee to reap,” and then “the Son of man” is free to come on “a white cloud, . . . having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle” (vss. 14-16).

And this? It is denounced and ridiculed as being the heresy of “perfectionism.” “Watch, and keep [your] garments,” says 16:15. The Holy Spirit is working night and day right now, world wide, to accomplish this task which is ridiculed as “impossible.”

We don’t know who it was but somebody once asked Jesus the really hard question: “Lord, are there few who are saved?” He gave an honest answer: “Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” He will at last be forced to inform the “many,” “I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. . . . There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In the last judgment they will argue with Him vociferously, “We ate and drank in your presence,

and You taught in our streets” (Luke 13:23, 24, 27, 28). Sorry, He says; “I do not know you.” “Few are chosen,” “the laborers are few,” etc. (Matt. 9:37; 22:14).

But wait a moment; get the full picture. The “144,000” of Revelation 7:1-4 seems like a tiny number from earth’s billions, yet when John views them through the zoom lens they turn out to be “a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations,.... clothed with white robes” (vs. 9). “In their mouth was found no guile [falsehood].” The TEV says “they have never been known to tell lies,” but their being “without fault” in the judgment does not mean they never have sinned; they are a pretty sorry lot down at the end of the sinful human race where “the love [*agape*] of many [has grown] cold” (Matt. 24:12), but they have been “justified by faith.” That means, like Abraham, sinful as he was, when he “believed” his faith was “counted to him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:3) and he stood before the throne as though he had never sinned! The sins of those who believe are cast into the ocean deeper than the Titanic and can never be retrieved.

Don’t worry whether you are one of the “few” or “many.” Thank the Father that His Son whom He “gave” died your second death, and rejoice every moment of your life from now on. You will then obey from the heart!

Satan, the fallen angel whose name was Lucifer, the highest of the created angels claims that his invention of sin is invincible. Here on planet earth he claims he proves that human beings cannot overcome sin; just look, he says, at Christ’s

church—after these two millennia since the cross, the church is still “lukewarm” and worldly at heart. And the Bride of Christ still hasn’t made herself ready.

The successful conclusion of the great controversy between Christ and Satan requires that the church as “the body of Christ” “overcome even as [Christ] overcame” and become a living demonstration of His power to save “to the uttermost.” That “overcoming” is what Christ says is the victory to be won in “the church of the Laodiceans” (cf. Rev. 3:14-21). Laodicea is the same as the “remnant” church of 12:17 and the same as those who “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” in 14:12.

Obviously the triumphant Laodicea in the end will be the same as those special “144,000” of 7:1-4 and 14:1-5 (a symbolic number, we hope). They will be a corporate “Mary Magdalene,” a mirror reflection of the self-is-crucified character of Jesus. Love (*agape*) will triumph.

The “great controversy” is like a war that ends with hand-to-hand, desperate fighting. The controversy is raging in each of our human hearts; it cannot be won in the corporate church unless it is also won in its individual experiences. Christ won the battle on His cross two millennia in the past; but that victory must now be demonstrated, lived out, proven effective before the world and the universe, in His people. They don’t help Him save the world but they demonstrate that He has been successful in doing it (cf. John 4:42; 1 Tim. 4:10). To this high destiny you and I have been called in these final scenes of the

great controversy! This requires healthy self-respect “in Christ” (Rom. 12:3), which is the essence of real faith.