

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 12, Revelation 6 on the Sixth Seal, Revelation 7 Who Can Stand Interlude.

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session 12, Revelation 6 on the sixth seal, and Revelation chapter 7, who can stand interlude.

We've seen that the cry of the saints in seal number five introduces a very important theme throughout the book of Revelation, and several times, we'll be referring back to seal number five and the so-called cry of vengeance.

We said that theme is actually rooted in the Old Testament in some of the Psalms and even some of the prophetic literature. And that is the promise of God avenging the blood of his people, the promise of God vindicating his suffering people, those who have suffered and died at the hands of a godless, oppressive empire. God would vindicate them by rewarding and vindicating his saints, but also by punishing those who have oppressed them and those who have harmed them and even put them to death.

And we'll see how that plays out in a couple of other places in Revelation. But what I want to look at before we move on to the final seal and then into chapter seven is the twofold response to the saints in their cry for vengeance, the souls who are under the altar. First of all, God responds to their cry by giving them white robes.

Some have suggested that this is a picture of the resurrection of the saints, that the white robes would be the resurrection body that they now receive. However, I would suggest that we do not see the saints who are beheaded for their faith receiving the resurrection bodies until Revelation chapter 20, verses four through six, where those who have been beheaded for their faith are then finally raised and come to life, and they reign with Christ for a thousand years. So, at this point, I don't think this is a picture of the saints receiving the resurrection bodies, which doesn't happen until chapter 20.

So, in a sense, chapter 20 will be the ultimate answer to the cry of the saints in chapter six; when they finally are vindicated and are raised, they come to life, and they'll reign with Christ for a thousand years in contrast to how they have been treated on this earth. And in a context where the beast reigns, they will reign, and they will be raised. Instead, probably as elsewhere in Revelation, the white robes suggest victory and probably even purity as well as righteousness.

For example, back in Revelation chapter three, in one of the messages to the churches, to the church in Sardis in verse four, yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not yet soiled their garments. They will walk with me dressed in white for they are worthy, probably as in that section where the white seems to suggest purity and contrast of those who have not soiled their garments by being tainted by the world, by compromising with the Roman empire and their idolatrous godless system of worship.

Instead, they have maintained their purity. And so I take it here that the white robes demonstrate their purity or righteousness, which the white robes are identified with the righteous acts of the saints later on in chapter 19 of Revelation. So here are probably indicating their righteousness and purity and their victory as well.

And here God, in a sense, is already reversing the world's verdict on the saints that their witness was useless, that they suffered in vain, and that they were conquered by the beast and by death. Now, God has already vindicated them and rewarded them with white garments, indicating their victory, righteousness, and purity. The second response of God to the saints is after giving them the white robes, he tells them that they must wait patiently until the full number of the others who are to suffer for their faith is completed.

The full number is completed and fulfilled. In other words, we have this interesting picture that God seems to suggest that there is a set number or a predetermined number, or at least a number of God's people who have yet to be martyred or who have yet to be put to death for their martyr or for their witness, for their faithful witness. And that number must be filled up, that number must be complete before God comes to render his final verdict, before God comes to avenge the blood of the saints before he comes and vindicates them finally by raising them and by giving them life.

We find that idea already in a number of Jewish apocalyptic books or texts. We've alluded several times to books like 1 Enoch and others, Jewish apocalyptic texts that are not included in the Old and New Testament, along with Daniel and Revelation, our two canonical examples, but books that would have provided an understanding of a certain type of literature. And sometimes these books provide background for since Revelation is an apocalypse, often we see John picking up on themes and ideas and language, not only from the Old Testament but sometimes themes and ideas and language that we find in some of the Jewish apocalypses.

In two apocalypses in particular, we find this idea of a set number of God's people or a set number of those who must suffer before, and that must be fulfilled and completed before God comes and consummates his purposes for history and brings about final and ultimate judgment. For example, 1 Enoch is from the book of 1 Enoch that we read briefly earlier, but in chapter 47 of 1 Enoch, he says, in those days, the

prayers of the righteous ascended to heaven. Interestingly, the connection with the prayers of the righteous is a theme in John's apocalypse and Revelation.

The prayers of the righteous ascending to heaven are the prayers of the righteous, the cry of the righteous, and God responding to that. In those days, the prayer of the righteous ascended to heaven, and the blood of the righteous came from the earth before the Lord of the spirits. There shall be days when all the holy ones who dwell in heaven above shall dwell together.

And with one voice, they shall supplicate and pray, glorifying, praising, and blessing the name of the Lord of the spirits on behalf of the blood of the righteous ones, which has been shed. Their prayers shall not stop from exhaustion before the Lord of the spirits; neither will they relax forever until judgment is executed for them. In those days, I saw him, the antecedent of time, while he was sitting upon his throne of glory, and the books of the living ones were opened before him, and all his power in heaven above and his escort stood before him, the hearts of the holy ones were filled with joy because the number of the righteous had been offered, the prayers of the righteous ones had been heard, and the blood of the righteous has been admitted before the Lord of the spirit.

And that phrase, the number of the righteous, and again, connected this idea of the prayer of the saints on behalf of those who have whose blood has been shed, and then that in connection with a certain number who had now been offered up, so that now God's judgment will follow. We find a similar idea in another very popular and important apocalyptic work known as 4th Ezra. In 4th Ezra chapter 4, and verses 33 through 37, and again, 4th Ezra is a book where the seer has a vision and also enters into an extensive dialogue with an angelic being, but also includes visionary material, and in dialogue with this angelic being in chapter 4, and verses 33 through 37, we read this, then I answered and said, how long, and again, notice that phrase, how long and when will these things be? Why are our years few and evil? And he answered me and said, the angel who is dialoguing with him, answered and said, you do not hasten faster than the most high, for your haste is for yourself, but the highest hastens on behalf of many.

Do not the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask about these matters, saying, how long are we to remain here? This is similar to the fifth seal in Revelation chapter 6. And when will the harvest of our rewards come? They're again crying out for when we will be vindicated. When will you judge? When will history be consummated, and when will you come to judge? And Jeremiah, the archangel, answered them and said when the number of those like yourself is completed, for he has weighed the age and the balance, and measured the times by measure, and numbered the times by number, and he will not move or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled. So in these two works, in 1st Enoch and 4th Ezra that I just read, you have this concept of a set number or a number of saints of God's people who must still be martyred, who

must still suffer, be put to death for the faith, and only when that time is completed. And 4th Ezra also adds the idea that there's a set amount of time, and when that is completed, then God will come and judge, and God will vindicate and reward his people fully.

And so John, maybe and probably, is drawing on that concept, whether he read 1st Enoch or 4th Ezra, I don't know. But John is probably drawing on that concept found in the apocalyptic literature of a set number, an appointed number of God's people yet to suffer, and perhaps an appointed time, and only when that is filled up, only when that is complete, then God will come and bring full vindication for his people, avenge their blood, and will judge those who have caused them to suffer. The use of this motif from apocalyptic literature may be used to demonstrate why a delay, maybe one of the explanations for why a delay, and now it's embodied in this voice of those who, the souls of the martyrs, but also probably to demonstrate again God's sovereignty over these events, that no matter how bad it gets, they can understand, no, God has a set time, and there is a set number of God's people that still have yet to be fulfilled and yet to be filled up.

Whether John is thinking literally in terms of God has a precise set number that once it gets there, but certainly John is drawing on this idea to explain the delay and to provide assurance for his people who are suffering for their faithful witness for Jesus Christ. And therefore, for those who are compromising to wake them up and to cause them to maintain a faithful witness for Jesus Christ, for the other two churches back in chapters two and three that are suffering, again, this would be a message of assurance that their suffering will not last even though there is some delay, but God certainly will come and avenge the blood of his faithful people. This brings us now to seal number six in verses 12 through 17.

Interestingly, it's actually seal number six that at least begins to answer the question of seal number five and the cry of the saints, who are the souls of those who are under the altar who cry out; how long? And now we see God beginning in seal number six; we see God beginning to pour out his judgment on an unbelieving world. And in this last seal, which is quite lengthy, the author once again alludes to and draws from the language of a number of Old Testament texts that all have in common this notion of, or this vision, this description of cosmic upheavals and the constellations of the universe doing all kinds of wacky things and the image of the sky being rolled up, et cetera, et cetera, obviously using metaphorical language of the whole kind of a dismantling of the entire universe. So to read again, in starting verse 12, John says, I watched as he opened the sixth seal.

And when he did, here's what happens. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black, like sackcloth made of goat hair.

The whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth as late figs dropped from a tree fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in the caves among the rocks and the mountains.

So, God is portrayed as no respecter of persons when it comes to judging. All spectrums of people along the socioeconomic spectrum are now subject to God's final judgment. And these people called out in verse 16 to the rock mountains and the fallen us and hid us from the face of him who sits in the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb for the great day of the wrath has come and who can stand.

And that language of the great day probably reflects the day of the Lord language from the Old Testament prophetic literature. The day of the Lord was the time when, in the future, God would come to bring history to its end; he would come and bring judgment on an unbelieving, wicked world and also reward and vindicate his people. Here, we see John borrowing from Old Testament prophetic text, the language of judgment, and drawing on what is probably rather simply stock imagery or stock language again, which he finds from prophetic text.

So we're probably not to take this language with strict literalness, as if you were standing outside on this day, and you could actually see the moon turning red and see a meteorite shower or something like that. And certainly, one could not watch the sky get rolled up. I'm not sure what that would even look like.

So, clearly, John is speaking in the language of symbols, but he finds symbols from his Old Testament predecessors. For example, one significant text is Isaiah chapter 24 and chapter 34, but Isaiah chapter 24, for example, and verses one through six, see the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it. He will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants.

It will be the same for priests, as for people, for master, as for servant, for mistress, as for maid, for seller, as for buyer, for borrower, as for lender, for debtor, as for creditor. The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The Lord has spoken his word.

The earth dries up and withers. The world languishes and withers. The exalted of the earth languish.

The earth is defiled by its people, who have disobeyed its laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant. And I want that text to notice the devastation of the earth affecting everyone along the entire spectrum of social and economic classes in the beginning part of chapter 24. But even more, another important text is chapter 34 and verse 4 of Isaiah.

All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved, and the sky will roll up like a scroll, and all the starry hosts will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree. It is clear that language influences and gets picked up in the sixth seal of the book of Revelation. There is also one other interesting text to read, Joel, in chapter two.

In Joel chapter two, again, an anticipation of the coming day of the Lord, we find similar language in verse 10. Before them, the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. So, notice what you have going on here.

You almost have the prophets drawing on a stock series of images to describe the final day of the Lord, the final end-time judgment. That again suggests that this is probably not to be taken with strict literalness. Jesus himself, in Matthew 24, seems to pick up on this language.

So John is simply taking a rather common language to describe end time judgment. It might be like today, we might say that someone turned the world upside down, or we might say all hell broke loose, not speaking literally, but speaking of an event so cataclysmic or an event so earth shaking, which is another image or metaphor, an event that has such far reaching and significant effects. It can be described in language that suggests the complete dismantling and dissolution of the universe.

So clearly with the sixth seal, we are finally at the end. We are now at the time where God comes to bring history to a close and, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic texts, now the day of the Lord breaks loose, and that means judgment for the people who have, especially the oppressors of those in seal five, who now cry out, how long? Now, we see that beginning to take place. So the seal then ends with everyone from every socioeconomic class where God does not recognize distinctions between those who have refused him and who have oppressed his people and who have followed the beast and thrown in their lot with pagan idolatrous Rome, that now finally the day of God's wrath has arrived, again, bringing us to the very end of history.

Now, two things before we move on to chapter seven. First of all, as a reminder, seal seven has not yet been opened yet. And we said that, and this will be true of the trumpets, which is the next series of seven.

Six and seven get broken off or separated, and there's intervening material. And so we'll see, as we've said a couple of times already, seal number seven gets opened at the beginning of chapter eight. So there's an intervening section, all of chapter seven, which we'll look at next.

But the other thing to recognize is that chapter six ends with an important question that is voiced by those who are subject to the day of God's wrath. This imagery of hiding in the rocks just demonstrates the horror and the terror of God's to try to flee from it and run from it. Again, this is Old Testament imagery, but the text in verse 17 ends with a question.

They say for the great day of wrath has come upon us. That's why they want to hide from it. And it ends with who can stand.

Now this question then, I take it, will get answered in chapter seven. Chapter seven is going to tell us who can stand in the day of God's wrath, who can stand against these plagues that are narrated in chapter six that culminate with the day of God's wrath, who is able to stand and resist that, or who is able to survive that. Chapter seven will provide the answer to that.

So, let's look at chapter seven then of Revelation. As we said, chapter seven sort of functions as an interlude between chapter six and, or I'm sorry, chapters six and eight, but seal six and seal seven, which finally gets opened in chapter eight. And we'll look at that when we get there.

And we said that it functions; chapter seven then plays a role not as a digression or as something that has just been indiscriminately inserted in between the seal sequence, between the sixth and seventh seals. Instead, as we've seen, it clearly answers the question that chapter six ends with Who is able to stand? And chapter seven will tell us that. Who can persevere through the seals of chapter six, and who can withstand the final day of judgment? And then we'll see after this interlude; the judgments will resume again in chapters eight and nine in the form of four or seven trumpet judgments.

But in answering the question, in other words, chapter seven is going to further interpret and describe the events of chapter six. Again, in other words, chapter seven does not chronologically follow the events of chapter six. Notice chapter seven; verse one begins with after this or after these things.

That is, this is a visionary sequence after John saw those things in chapter six. Now he sees the events in chapter seven, but chapter seven seems to go back again and answer that question: who can stand? In other words, chapter seven is not just a digression. It further interprets the events narrated in chapter seven.

And so I want to read chapter seven, and then we'll again talk a little bit broadly about what's going on in it and then examine a couple of the details, especially the two central groups that are introduced in two sections of chapter seven. But chapter seven begins; after this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the

land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God.

He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea. Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we have put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God. 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. From the tribe of Gad, 12,000.

From the tribe of Asher, 12,000. From the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000. From the tribe of Manasseh, 12,000.

From the tribe of Simeon, 12,000. From the tribe of Levi, 12,000. From the tribe of Issachar, 12,000.

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

After this, I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could number from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands, and they cried out in a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne, and they worshiped God, saying, Amen, praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honor, power, and strength to be to our God forever and ever. Amen.

Then one of the elders asked me, these in white robes, who are they, and where do they come from? I answered them, sir, you know. And he said to me, these are those who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Therefore, they are before the throne of God and they serve him day and night in his temple. And he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat upon them nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will lead them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. As I said, chapter seven revolves

around, or at least most of the interest in it revolves around the understanding of these two groups.

We're introduced to two separate groups, and the question is, what might be their relationship with each other? What is their identity? Who are they? Are these the same groups? Is this the same group being referred to? Are these two separate groups? How do we make sense of this? The two groups are group number one, the 144,000 Israelites who are sealed, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes that are enumerated in this text. And then group number two is introduced in verse nine, which is a multitude that cannot be numbered. A multitude that is made up of people from every tribe, language, and tongue.

The question then is, how do we identify each of these groups? And then again, what is their relationship? Are they the same? Are they someone different? It's interesting too, John's perspective. In chapter seven, John's perspective, in a sense, still seems to be on Earth. Though in the beginning of chapter seven, it could almost be a heavenly perspective where it says he sees four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds.

But clearly, John seems to be seeing an event on earth. And then the sealing of the 144,000 would presumably take place from an earthly perspective. But then with the second group, starting in verse nine, John's perspective seems again to be a heavenly one.

And we said Revelation keeps shifting back and forth between heaven and earth. So now in verse nine, it's a heavenly one as he sees this great multitude surrounding the throne, the heavenly throne, presumably the same one as back in chapters four and five in the heavenly court scene, the heavenly throne room of God. Now, the rest of chapter seven is from a heavenly perspective.

Chapter eight, he'll shift back to an earthly perspective or an earthly scene. But let's start by looking at the first group in verses one through eight, and that is the 144,000. And the first thing to note is the vision begins, interestingly, before the author ever gets to describing this 144,000 Israelites sealed from each of the 12 tribes.

He begins by describing a vision of an angel or four angels who are at the four corners of the earth. And again, notice the significance of the number four; four is symbolic of the earth, and four indicates, we might say today, the four corners of the earth indicating the entirety of the globe, the entirety of the earth. So, the four angels are holding back the four winds.

And the the question that raises in my mind is what in the world are these four winds and why are they holding them back? Most likely the four winds probably at least

represent the four horses back in chapter six. The winds probably here suggest destruction and judgment as they could in apocalyptic literature and the Old Testament too, I believe. And so the four winds probably refer back to the first four horses who come out and wreak havoc on the earth in the form of plagues.

They may also perhaps anticipate some of the plagues, especially the trumpet plagues, to come because those plagues harm the earth, water, and sea. So the point is these four winds are the plagues, at least the ones in chapter six, maybe also anticipating the ones in chapter eight that come out on the earth to harm the earth and to harm the sea. And so the angels are told to hold back, to restrain the winds, that is, the judgment from happening, and not allow them to happen until something else happens.

And that is verse two. Then John sees an angel that comes from the east, and he has a seal that he wants to seal the 144,000. Now, this event clearly refers back to Ezekiel's chapter nine.

Remember, we said Revelation roughly follows the exact order of Ezekiel. Chapters four and five were dependent on Ezekiel chapters one and two, Ezekiel's throne room vision. And now, in chapter nine of Ezekiel, we find the seal of God.

God comes to seal his servants. And so now we find an angel who comes down and seals his people before the plagues can be let out before the four winds can be loosed to wreak their havoc. And they are sealed so that they will not be harmed.

Now, just to summarize, this does not mean that they're spared from all physical harm. As we see throughout Revelation, because of their suffering witness, John expects that his people will indeed suffer and will indeed be put to death. But as far as being recipients of God's judgment, as far as anything harming them spiritually and thwarting their inheritance, they are now sealed and kept from these judgments.

The question of these 144,000, when you read this, is that John is fairly specific. It's interesting. He doesn't just say 144,000 from every tribe of Israel or 144,000 from the tribes of Israel, but he goes down in verses five through eight; he goes down the list of tribes and specifies the number from each tribe, which is 12,000.

Now, first off, let me just remind you, and we'll return to this, but remind you of the significance of the number 12 that we probably should not expect these numbers here to be taken with strict mathematical precision or literalness. But what is important is the number 12, and the number 12 signifies the people of God. In this case, the 12 tribes of Israel from the Old Testament, and 12,000 being 12 times the number 1,000.

And then the 144 is simply 12 times 12. So again, John is working with 12 and multiples of 12 times 1,000, to come up with this number. We'll maybe talk a little bit more about that.

So the first point is we shouldn't, whoever this group is, is we should not take this with too strict of a literal approach or with mathematical precision as if John was sitting there with a calculator counting all of these persons and came up with exactly 144,000. The numbers in Revelation are to be taken symbolically. But who are these 144,000 who receive this sealing that protects them from God's judgment? And probably also, especially seal number six, the day of God's wrath, who are the 144,000? There have been a number of suggestions, but I'll highlight the most prominent suggestions and then suggest what I think this might be.

First of all, many have maintained that this is literal Israel, that the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel, and especially the precise specifying of the tribes, and 12,000 from each one, indicates that this is national ethnic Israel in the end time. This is usually associated with a certain way of interpreting Revelation that we've mentioned a few times, especially in a very, very popular form communicated in a series like the Left Behind series. But the idea is that once God has removed his church, the people of God, before chapter four, then God will usher in a period of time where there will be tribulation in fulfillment of the Old Testament.

He will restore his people to Israel and restore the promises to them, but before that, they will go through a period of tribulation. Now God is seen as sealing 144,000 from the nation of Israel, who will be his people, who will be his faithful witnesses during that time of tribulation. And that is what is envisioned here.

So we should take this fairly literally of God choosing people from ethnic Israel whom he will seal and keep during this time of future tribulation. So, this clearly refers to an event in the future. A second possibility is that some have understood this as similar to the first view, but some have understood this along the lines of Romans chapter 11 and verses 24 through 26, especially where Paul in chapters 9 through 11, Paul addresses the issue of the fate of God's people Israel.

And towards the end of chapter 11, he utters those words, and then all Israel will be saved, which most take as Paul expecting that sometime in the future, perhaps at the second coming of Christ, many in the nation, many of God's people Israel will be saved. Although Paul doesn't tell us all the details and exactly how that takes place, but there are indications that he envisions a future event that occurs at the second coming of Christ. Some would interpret chapter seven of Revelation in light of the fact that in Romans chapter 11, all Israel will be saved in the future.

And here, we see the author portraying that event in, again; most would agree, symbolic, highly symbolic language. But like view number one, it takes the reference

to the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel as a reference to literal Israel, though very different from chapter one. A third view that probably has a few subsets to it that I'm not going to go into any detail.

A third view is that this mention of 144,000 from the tribes of Israel is to be taken symbolically for the complete people of God consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. In other words, this is to be seen along similar lines to what Paul and even other New Testament authors do with Old Testament language, referring to Israel, now applying it to the new people of God, the church consisting of Jews and Gentiles. And we see Paul doing that at times; read Ephesians chapter two, and especially 11 through 22, where Paul takes the language of the covenants and of nearness to God and participates in the promises of Isaiah, temple language, and now applies it to a household of Israel, now applies it to Gentiles as well.

Or I think also a first Peter chapter two, where Peter doing something similar that John does in Revelation, takes texts such as Exodus 19.6, takes temple language, kingdom, they are a kingdom of priests, they are a royal nation, a priesthood, takes that and now applies it to the church made up of Jew and Gentile. So, is it possible then that this is language from the Old Testament referring to ethnic national Israel that, like other New Testament authors, John now applies to the new people of God that Old Testament Israel now finds fulfillment in and anticipates that is a people no longer restricted to just national Israel, but expanding that and including along with Israel, including Gentiles as well in the new people of God that New Testament authors now call the church. In fact, I would suggest that this is the way that we should understand it and that John has taken Old Testament language about Israel and now applies it to the church, the new people of God, now consisting of Jews and Gentiles and following in the steps of other New Testament writers.

In fact, John has already done this. I've already mentioned chapter one, verses five and six, and chapter five as well in the first hymn sung by the four living creatures and twenty-four elders, where John takes Exodus 19.6, the promise made to Israel back in Exodus that they would be a kingdom of priests. They would represent God's rule, his presence.

Now, John applies that to the international or transcultural people of God, including Israel, but also including other tongues and tribes and languages and people from other nations. Now make up the new people of God that fulfills the intention and destiny of God's people, Israel, now embodied in a new people of God that centers around the person of Jesus Christ, centers around the Lamb. These are the people that now the Lamb has purchased and created to be his kingdom of priests as his new people.

And so, I think that that's probably what John is doing here. Now, before we look at why, then, would he portray the church as the people of God as 144,000 from the

tribes of Israel? And why would he go to such lengths to number them, to single out each tribe and number them? Before we do, just two minor, two, I don't want to say minor, two interesting and maybe significant details of this list. There are a number of things going on in this list that I don't want to go into a lot of detail about, but I do want to highlight two of them.

And it's based on the fact that when you compare this list with Old Testament lists when you go back to the Old Testament when the tribes of Israel are enumerated, the 12 tribes, this is very different from those in at least two respects. And there's others, but I want to highlight two. Number one is the fact that there's no mention of Dan or Ephraim, the tribes of Dan or Ephraim.

The reason for that might be, and this would be very significant for Revelation. The reason for that might be is because at times Dan and Ephraim were both associated at times in other Jewish literature with idolatry. And so for that reason, in a context perhaps where John is addressing readers tempted to engage in an idolatrous, godless empire, for that reason, he may have left these two tribes out.

But it's possible because of associations in some literature with Dan and Ephraim with idolatry, they've been left out of this list. The second one I want to draw attention to is it's interesting that Judah heads the list, the tribe of Judah. And when you read the text of Revelation carefully, this probably has the easiest explanation.

And that is already back in chapter five, verse five. Were we not introduced to Jesus as the lion from the tribe of Judah? So, this list has a Christological emphasis. By beginning with the tribe of Judah, the author is probably saying something, again, that this list is unique. This group is unique because now it centers around the person of Jesus Christ.

Now, it centers around the one from the tribe of Judah, who again is the slain Lamb who has purchased people from every tribe, language, and nation to become a kingdom of priests. Now, here they are, and so Judah heads the list. Also, clearly, both chapter five and verse five, but probably also the list here, reflect Genesis chapter 49 and verse 10, and the role that the tribe of Judah was to play where there was a ruler promised from the tribe of Judah.

And so the emphasis again would be that membership in the people of God now is determined by their relationship to the one from the tribe of Judah. So, Judah has probably been moved to the beginning of the list because of the significance of Jesus Christ as the one from the tribe of Judah and as the one who comes as a slain lamb to purchase people for himself. So, in conclusion, it appears that the author has taken the imagery from the Old Testament of the 12 tribes of Israel, and now he has utilized this imagery as a symbol for the new people of God, the church defined now

by their relationship to the slain Lamb, the one from the tribe of Judah, who is now creating a people to be his kingdom and priests.

So, I am probably not referring to a literal 12 tribes of Judah, probably not, or Israel, which is probably not referring to a literal restoration of people from each of the 12 tribes. And there are many that debate whether that could even be done or whether there are still people from the pure 12 tribes of Israel. And I don't want to get into all that, but simply to stress that John is probably using this symbolically as he does, and as other New Testament authors do, to take Old Testament language to now refer to the New Testament people of God.

And again, we said the reason for using 144,000 is the 12 times 12, 12 being symbolic of the people of God, both the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles, then 12 times 12 to get 144,000. So John's playing with a multiple of 12 to get 144, and then times 1,000, 1,000 being a large and complete number. So what you have here is John envisioning the complete people of God in fulfillment of Old Testament.

Now, John sees the complete people of God in the form of the 144,000 sealed from all the tribes of Israel. Now, we still have to ask the question, why does John enumerate the 12 tribes? Or why does John go to the extent of going through the entire list of these 12 tribes and drawing out 12,000 from each of them? What is the purpose of that? Well, first of all, one thing to say, when John says 12 from each of the 12,000, from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000, from the tribe of Judah, 12,000, from the tribe of Levi, again, I don't think we should take that with strict literalness as if there are two groups here. You have the larger group of the tribes of Israel, and then you have a smaller group, 12,000 from each tribe.

So what you end up with is 144,000, which is actually a smaller group taken out of a much larger group of the tribes of Israel. I don't think that's what John intends; this is a select group out of a much larger group. Instead, I'll demonstrate, I think that this, instead of taking it with that level of literalness, I'll hopefully demonstrate that there's another reason why John would say 12,000 from each tribe.

And the solution to all this then, I think, has been effectively suggested and compellingly argued by Richard Bauckham, a British scholar, we've mentioned him several times, and as sort of a little excursus, one of the best books that you can get your hands on for helping you to understand Revelation is a little book that Richard Bauckham wrote called *The Theology of Revelation*, published by Cambridge University Press. That's part of a whole series of *Theology of Matthew*, *Theology of Luke*, *Theology of the shorter epistles*, *later epistles of Paul*, etc., *The Theology of Hebrews*. But *Theology of Revelation*, just a short paperback written by Richard Bauckham, in my opinion, is still the single most valuable introductory volume to reading the book of Revelation.

It introduces you to what the kind of literature Revelation is, to its function, to reading it, to the main theological themes. It doesn't give you a commentary in every passage, but it introduces you to the main theological themes, has a section on applying it and reading it for the modern day, and just overall is the most balanced and sane, and in my opinion, most helpful introduction to interpreting and reading the book of Revelation. I highly recommend that you purchase that.

Another one while I'm on books, another one more recent, at least from an American perspective, is a book called Reading Revelation Responsibly by an author named Michael Gorman. And again, it's similar; it's more of an introduction to how to read Revelation in light of its background, in light of the kind of literature, how do we read it, how do we read the different sections, also is full of insight as to how we apply it to our modern-day situation. So, outside of major commentaries, those would be two very helpful works.

But back to Richard Bauckham. Richard Bauckham has suggested that when you go back to the Old Testament and you look at sections where the tribes of Israel are numbered, he says that predominantly you find that taking place when God is determining the military strength of Israel, to see, basically counting the number of fighting men from each of the tribes and determining their military strength. A good example of that is in Numbers chapter 1, which we'll look at in just a moment.

And you remember the story in 2 Samuel chapter 24, where God incites David to number the tribes of Israel. Basically, that is determining their military strength and determining the number of eligible persons to enter into warfare. So, the census here of the tribes is a census to determine the military strength and eligibility of warriors from each of the tribes.

In my opinion, this is probably why John uses that language from each tribe. So again, I don't think we should push this too literally to suggest the 144,000 is just a smaller group from a larger group. I think the entire people of God, the entire church here is being portrayed as a mighty army.

The language of each tribe is just to recall, for example, Numbers Chapter 1. In fact, if you go back to Numbers chapter 1, which is a census of Israel to determine the size of the army in a sense, it begins, chapter 1 verse 1, the Lord spoke to Moses in the tent of the meeting in the desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month. The second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt, he said to take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name one by one. You and Aaron are to number by their divisions all the men in Israel 20 years old or older who are able to serve in the army.

And then notice some of the language, for example, in verse 21, verse 20, from the descendants of Reuben, the firstborn son of Israel, all the men 20 years old or more

who were able to serve in the army were listed by name one by one, according to the records of their clans and families. The number from the tribe of Reuben was 46,500. Again, John uses 12,000 because he's working with symbolic numbers.

In verse 23, then again, when he counts the number of the descendants of Simeon, he says the number out of, or the number from the tribe of Simeon, the very same language John uses here. So I think John is, by using this language 12,000 from the tribes, he is deliberately alluding back to Numbers chapter one and other texts where Israel was counted as a census to determine the number of eligible fighting men to determine the military strength of the nation. And so here, John applies that language of the people of God to say something about them.

The people of God in chapter seven are depicted as those who are sealed, who are able to stand in the day of the Lord; those who are sealed and protected from the plagues are now depicted as a mighty army who goes out and does battle. In fact, to further substantiate that, interestingly, when the 144,000 appear later on in Revelation chapter 14 and verses one through four, notice how they're described. Then I looked, and I saw before, and before there before me was the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him the 144,000 who had his name on his, and his father's name written on their foreheads, probably the seal they get from chapter seven.

And I heard a sound from the heaven and the roar of rushing waters, like the loud peal of thunder, verse three, and they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and elders. And no one could learn the song except the 144,000 who were redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not devile themselves with women for they kept themselves pure.

It's interesting that in chapter 14, they're described basically as male virgins who do not engage in sexual relationships with women, which was exactly one of the requirements during war under the Old Testament. And you remember the story of David and Bathsheba? When he got Uriah to come home, Uriah tried to get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba to cover up what David had done and the fact that he had got Bathsheba pregnant, but he refused to sleep with her. That was part of the requirement for war: abstinence from sexual relationships.

And so adding seven and 14 up, you come up with this picture of the 144,000 as an army, as a military enclave that goes out to do battle. However, while the church is portrayed as a mighty army that goes out to do battle, having read chapter five, especially, and reading the rest of the book of Revelation, it makes clear how they do battle. Ironically, the church, as a mighty army, will go out and do battle, but they will conquer, and they will overcome, and they will be victorious in the same way the Lamb was through their suffering witness for the person of Jesus Christ.

So, this is sort of an ironic vision. This is not an army that goes out with swords and weapons and kills like Rome does in chapter six and the first two seals, but instead, here you have a mighty army that goes out to do battle, yet they do so ironically through their faithful suffering witness, even to the point of death. And so I take it then that the first group consists of the entire church as God's people who are now portrayed as a mighty army along the lines of, and using imagery from the Old Testament, now they go out as a mighty army like Israel did to do battle, yet they do so not by weapons, but through their faithful witness, even to the point of death.

Now, in the next section, we'll look at who the multitude is that cannot be numbered in the rest of the section and what their relationship is to the first group, the 144,000, in the first eight verses of chapter seven.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session 12, Revelation 6 on the sixth seal, and Revelation chapter 7, who can stand interlude.