The 144,000

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[0:00] Well, if we could, this evening, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read, the book of Revelation, Revelation chapter 7.

Revelation chapter 7, and if we read again from the beginning. After this, I, John, saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on the earth or sea or against any tree.
Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun with the seal of the living God. And he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God on their four heads.
And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.
I'm sure you're familiar with the idea of a Russian nesting doll. A Russian nesting doll. Maybe you saw them in somebody's house recently. Maybe you have some yourself.
[1:22] There's this large Russian doll. And then when you break it apart, when you take the top off, there's another Russian doll nesting inside. And then when you take that doll apart, there's another doll inside.

And when you take that one apart and so on and so forth. Well, when you come to the book of Revelation, you could say that it's a bit like a Russian nesting doll. Because there are many layers to this apocalyptic book.
In fact, there are seven layers to this book. There are seven, you could say, seven Russian dolls in the book of Revelation. There are seven cycles in this book of Revelation.
As we said before, the book of Revelation, it's one long revelation all the way through. And it's a revelation from Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ, for the church of Jesus Christ.
But as we go through it, we see that there are seven layers. There are seven cycles in this revelation. And as you'd expect with each cycle that we go through, each cycle reveals more and more about Jesus Christ as the risen, reigning and ruling king who is going to return.
[2:33] That's what the entire book is about. But what's interesting is that at the beginning of each cycle, it is always introduced and the cycle is indicated by the phrase, After this.

After this. So the first cycle, it began in chapter one, when Jesus instructed John, saying to John, Write the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.
And then it goes into chapters two and three, where Jesus highlights the seven churches of Asia and all the sins and struggles and stresses and strains that these churches faced.
Then the second cycle begins in chapter four, where John wrote, After this, I looked and behold, a door standing open in heaven.
And the second cycle, as we've gone through these chapters, it has revealed the throne room of heaven with God, the father seated upon the throne. And there's this sovereign scroll containing a comprehensive plan of God's eternal decrees in the world held in his right hand.
[3:41] And as we saw even last week, we were looking at the seals. This scroll is sealed with seven seals. And it's seven seals because seven is the number of perfection.

The only one worthy to open the seven seals and open the scroll is Jesus, the perfect lamb of God. And even last week in chapter six, we saw, or the time before as well, we saw that the first four seals revealed the four horsemen of the apocalypse.
And we saw that the four horsemen of the apocalypse, they're not a scene of terror, but a scene of triumph. Because the first seal revealed Jesus. He's the king of kings riding out on the white horse. The second seal revealed the red horse of persecution. The third seal revealed the black horse of poverty. The fourth seal revealed the pale horse of death.

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And then last Wednesday evening, we were looking at the fifth seal, which revealed God's justice to the persecuted saints. And the sixth seal revealed God's judgment and the punishment of sinners.
[4:50] And so when you come to chapter seven, which we're looking at this evening, when you come to chapter seven, you would immediately expect the seventh seal to be the seal that's now opened on this sovereign scroll.

But instead, there's this interlude where chapter seven begins with the words, After this. After this, initiating yet another cycle.
Where it says, After this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on the earth or sea or against any three.
And with a new cycle, John here, he sees something new. He sees something new that's about to happen. And what John sees is fascinating, because with the first after this, in verse one, we see what Calamangus mentioned in his prayer.
We see the church militant. That's the first thing we see in verses one to eight. We have the church militant, which is the church on earth that engages and is fighting the good fight of faith.
[6:03] Then the second after this comes in verse nine. If you look down at verse nine, John says, After this, I looked and behold, a great multitude that no one could number. That's the church triumphant, which is the church now in glory, in its glorified state.

And so during the interlude of chapter seven, John witnesses, first of all, the church militant, verses one to eight. Then the church triumphant, verses nine to 17.
But then as the interlude of chapter seven concludes, we go into chapter eight, which picks up from chapter six. So there's this interlude of chapter seven, and we see the church silent.
When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And so in this next cycle, John, he sets before us, first of all, the church militant, the church triumphant, and then the church silent.
The church militant, the church triumphant, and then the church silent. And so this evening, we're looking at the first section. We're looking at verses one to eight, where John sees the church militant.
[7:15] And when John sees the church militant, he says something about them. He speaks about them. He describes them, or he sees them sealed. In verses one to eight, we notice the seal and then the sealed.

So the seal and the sealed. There are two simple headings this evening. The seal and the sealed. So first of all, the seal. After this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on the earth or sea or against any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun with the seal of the living God. And he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.
So when we use the term church, the church militant, we're referring to the church of Jesus Christ in this world as it is now, as it engages in a spiritual warfare.
Which is the image that is presented and portrayed to us there in verses one and two. Because John here, he says that he saw four angels, four corners of the earth and four winds.
[8:41] Which is important because the number four is the number of the world. The number four is the number of the world. We saw that in the previous chapter with the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

They were those who were galloping across the history of this world. And here there are four angels, four corners and four winds of the earth. And they symbolize the whole world and the spiritual warfare that this world comes with towards the church.
This is what the church is facing as the church militant. They are facing the world. And as Paul writes in Ephesians 6, he describes that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against spiritual wickedness in high places.
Therefore, says Paul, take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand firm. And so, my friend, we're part of the church militant. We're here in the world, in the here and now.
And we're engaged in this spiritual warfare. Which is why we're to go into our armory. Just like John Bunyan described in his Pilgrim's Prognace. He taught that Christian went into his armory.

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[9:57] And he was to put on the whole armor of God and pick up his weapons of warfare. Because our weapons of warfare, they're weapons that might not seem much to us, but they're mighty in the hand of God.

They are the weapons of all prayer. And the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And with those weapons of warfare, Paul tells us, as he told Timothy, fight the good fight of faith.
That's what we're to do as the church militant. We are to fight the good fight of faith. That's what the hymn writer tells us. As the church militant, we're to stand up, stand up for Jesus.
You soldiers off the cross, lift high his royal banner. It must not suffer loss. From victory unto victory, his army he shall lead. Till every foe is vanquished.
And Christ is Lord indeed. My friend, we are the church militant. And our commander-in-chief, he calls us to stand firm.
[11:03] He calls us to stand firm against the wiles of the devil and against the world that surrounds us. But the thing is, and this is what's emphasized here, we don't stand firm in our own strength.

We stand firm because we're sealed. We don't stand firm in our own strength. We stand firm because we're sealed.
And that's what John sees. He sees the church militant. And he sees the church sealed. He sees every one of them sealed. He says in verse 2, So they are sealed.
We don't stand firm in our own strength. We stand firm because we're sealed. And as you know, an ancient seal, especially within this context, it was a seal made of wax, just like the sovereign scroll would have been a seal with, a scroll with seven seals in it.
And the wax would be stamped with a signet ring to set the seal, to secure the scroll, so that it wouldn't be opened, it wouldn't be read by someone who was not permitted.
[12:33] But here John says that the servants of God are being sealed. It's not a scroll that's been sealed. The servants of God are being sealed with a seal of the living God on their foreheads.

John saw the church militant sealed. And of course, the seal is set and sealed by Jesus, the Savior. He is the angel. He's described in the Old Testament as the angel of the Lord or the angel of the covenant. And in here, in Revelation, he is the angel from the rising of the sun.
The angel is Jesus because he has power and authority to set his seal upon his servants, the servants of God who are sealed with the seal of the living God.
He has power and authority to set his seal upon the church militant so that they will stand firm. And as we consider the concept of the seal and the church militant being sealed, I want to say that the seal of the living God is first of all a seal of sovereignty.
[13:44] It's a seal of sovereignty because Jesus, our sovereign Savior, he sets the seal of the living God, we're told there, upon our foreheads.

We're marked. He sets the seal of the living God upon our forehead. And it's upon our forehead because we have been elect from all eternity, chosen by God, predestinated before the world.
We have been bought at a price, redeemed by his blood, saved by his grace, adopted in the beloved, justified by faith, sanctified through the Spirit, kept by the power of God, and now sealed, claimed as his own.
And we not only believe in him, this Jesus, we belong to him. He has set his seal upon us. He has set his seal upon us. We have been sealed, it says, with the seal of the living God.
We have been sealed with his seal of sovereignty. He has sovereignly and divinely chosen us as his people. But it's not only a seal of sovereignty, it's also a seal of security.
[14:57] We're as the church militant. We're to put on the whole armour of God. We're to stand firm against the wiles of the devil. We're to fight the good fight of faith. We're not to be off the world, but we must live in the world.

And as we live in this world, like everyone living in this world, we are confronted and challenged by all the same sins and sicknesses and sufferings and sorrows and separations of this life.
But what sets us apart from the world, and this is what always gives us that great hope as a Christian, what sets us apart from the world is that when we encounter sin, sickness, suffering, sorrow or separation, we know that we have security.
We have security because we are securely sealed by our sovereign Saviour, Jesus Christ. We are securely sealed by our sovereign Saviour, Jesus Christ.

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This seal, it's a seal of sovereignty. It's a seal of security. And it's a seal of security because as Paul reminds us in that wonderful chapter, he reassures us in Romans chapter 8.
[16:08] He says, Those who love God, all things work together for good to those who are the called according to his purpose, those who are the sealed according to his purpose.

Because who shall bring any charge against God's elect? Who shall bring any charge against God's sealed? Who is to condemn God's sealed? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Because we're sealed. Shall tribulation separate us? No. Distress? No. Persecution? No. Famine? No. Nakedness? No. Danger? No. Peril?
No. Sword? No. No. In all these things, in all these things, says Paul, we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. Why? Because we're persuaded. We are sealed.
And the fact that we are sealed, says Paul, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, neither height, nor depth, nor any other creature, is able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.
[17:17] My friend, you are sealed. And that seal upon you, it is sovereign, it is secure. But there's one more thing, because the seal of the living God, which has been set upon you, is a seal of surety.

It's a seal of sovereignty, it's a seal of security, and it's a seal of surety. A seal of surety, because as Paul points out to us in many of his letters, he says that God has put his seal upon us, and he has given us his spirit in our heart as a guarantee.
That's how you know you're sealed. You have the spirit. Because as Paul says, after you heard the word of truth, after you believed the word of truth, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.
And because you have the spirit, because you are sealed by Jesus, Paul says, do not grieve the Holy Spirit by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.
You know, time and time again, Paul emphasizes and explains that the seal of the living God is a seal of surety. It's a seal of the Holy Spirit where the Holy Spirit in our heart is our guarantee.
[18:34] It's our surety of heaven. The Holy Spirit is our down payment and deposit, says Paul. He's our pledge. He is our promise that one day we will receive our inheritance.

Because our inheritance, says Peter, it is incorruptible. It's undefiled. It fadeth not away because it's reserved in heaven for us. We are sealed for the day of redemption.
And so the seal of the living God, the seal that has been set upon the church militant, us, it's a seal of sovereignty, a seal of security, and a seal of surety.
It's wonderful. It's a seal of sovereignty, security, and surety. But then we have to ask the question, well, who are the sealed?
That's what the seal is. The seal of sovereignty, security, and surety. But who are the sealed?
That's what I want us to see secondly. So we see the seal in the first three verses and then the sealed.
[19:40] The sealed. Look at verse four. John says, And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.

12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin.
They were all sealed. And so what we ought to notice here is that John not only sees the seal of the living God which has been set upon the foreheads of the church militant, and when he sees the seal, as we said, it's a seal of sovereignty, it's a seal of security, and it's a seal of surety.
Now we're told that John hears something. So he sees the seal and then verse four he says, I heard. So verse one, I saw. Verse four, I heard.
He hears how many people are sealed and John hears how many people are to receive this seal from the living God. I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.
[21:02] Now when it comes to the subject of the 144,000 in the book of Revelation, as you know, and maybe as you've read, maybe there are a variety of interpretations and a variety of explanations given for this unique number.

What's interesting is that many religions, many sects, many cults, they take this number literally rather than symbolically. Mormons believe that the 144,000 refers to the number of priests that will administer the everlasting gospel.

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Similarly, Muslims believe that the 144,000 refers to the total number of prophets that there will be in Islam. And I'm sure you're aware that the Jehovah Witnesses, they also take the 144,000 literally. They believe that there will be exactly elected 144,000 faithful Jehovah Witnesses who have lived since the time of Pentecost until the end of the world.
And those faithful Jehovah Witnesses will be resurrected at the last day to spend eternity in the immediate presence of God.
[22:22] But all the other Jehovah Witnesses who weren't part of the faithful few in the immediate presence of God, they will be resurrected to live forever on a restored paradise on earth.

So with only 144 spaces in their higher heaven and over 8 million Jehovah Witnesses in the world, you can imagine that it creates a lot of competition between all the righteous Witnesses of Jehovah. Needless to say, with so many differing opinions of a literal 144,000, it ought to show us that this specific number should always be seen as symbolic.
Because as you know from the context, many of the numbers in the book of Revelation, they're all symbolic. We've seen that with the number 4 earlier on. 4 angels, 4 corners, 4 winds.
It's the number of the world. We see it with the number 7. 7 cycles, 7 lampstands, 7 stars, 7 angels, 7 spirits, 7 churches, 7 horns, 7 eyes, 7 seals.
[23:27] The number 7 is repeated because we're seeing a scene of perfection. Heaven is a scene of perfection. Jesus is the perfect Lamb in the midst of the throne.

And so when the 144,000 are sealed with this seal of sovereignty, security and surety, and it's upon the foreheads of the church militant, it's a symbolic vision.
It's symbolic of all of God's covenant people who serve God in this world. Not one of them is missed out.
Not one of them is lost and through much tribulation each and every one of them will enter the kingdom of heaven.
My friend, the 144,000 is symbolic of all of God's sealed and spirit filled people in the church throughout the world.
[24:29] The 144,000 symbolizes the fullness, the completeness, the abundance of God's covenant people throughout the world. And we know this because if you're good at maths, we know the man here is very good at maths, and I hope I get all my maths right.

But you know, as we read there, there were 12,000 from 12 different tribes, which is 144,000. So if you break it down into numbers, 144,000 is 12 times 12 times 10 times 10 times 10.
And it's 12 times 12 because as we saw earlier in this revelation, we saw the 24 elders, two sets of 12. We saw them around the throne of heaven.
They symbolize the church of Jesus Christ in both testaments, both the Old and the New Testament. There was the 12 sons of Israel in the Old Testament, there were the 12 apostles in the New Testament.
And so 12 times 12 emphasizes that the church of Jesus Christ is one. It's one united church throughout the world.
[25:46] We are one church. Many branches, many denominations, but we are one church. And so 12 times 12 is 144. But then you have 10 times 10 times 10, which is a thousand.

Hope I'm getting all this right. And it's 10 times 10 times 10 because 10 is the number of holiness. 10 is the number of holiness. We see that in the tabernacle.
When you look at the construction of the tabernacle, and particularly the most holy place, the holy of holies, where God's glorious presence dwelt, God sat upon his throne in glory, in his holy of holies.
The holy of holies, we're told, was 10 cubits long by 10 cubits wide by 10 cubits high. It was a complete sphere. It was 10 times 10 times 10.
It was thrice holy. It was holy, holy, holy, which is what the angels of heaven proclaim around the throne of God.
[26:57] And so 12 times 12 times 10 times 10 times 10 is 144,000, which is symbolic of all of God's sealed and spirit-filled people in the church of Jesus Christ.

And you know what's beautiful? Is that their seal of sovereignty and seal of security and seal of surety, it guarantees them that they too, like God, will be made perfect in holiness?
And you know, my friend, is that not our great hope as the church militant, as those who are here in the world this evening? That's our great hope that we will be made perfect in holiness.

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Because as our catechism teaches us, the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness. They do immediately pass into glory and their bodies still being united to Christ, still belonging to Jesus, they rest in their graves until the resurrection.
And so as the church militant, John is seeing this vision of the church militant and he's been reminded, stop looking inward, start looking upward, keep your eyes looking upward, keep looking to the one who leads the 144,000.
[28:29] Look to the king and head of his church. Keep looking upward to the one who leads this 144,000 who are sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.

And with this I will conclude because if you notice we're told in verse 4 that the number of the sealed was 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel.
But this list of 12 times 12,000, this list isn't a description of the 12 tribes of Israel. It's not a description of the 12 tribes of Israel because the tribes of Dan and the tribe of Ephraim are missing. And Dan and Ephraim are missing because they were the two tribes who became consumed by idolatry. Ephraim is joined to her idols, says the Lord.
Leave her alone. They were consumed by idolatry. What's more is that the order of the tribes is completely different. So as we have it at the end of Genesis, you have the order of all these tribes, they were in order of age.
[29:41] But Judah is mentioned first here, before the eldest son of Jacob who was Reuben. And of course Judah is mentioned first because Jesus, as Calamangus mentioned again in his prayer, Jesus came from the tribe of Judah.

Jesus was the lion of the tribe of Judah. And that's why he's first and foremost in this list. Just like it was with the four horsemen of the apocalypse, leading them out.
Here is Jesus, leading the 144,000 sealed and spirit-filled people of God. Because as those who have the seal of the living God upon them, as those who have the seal of sovereignty and security and surety, the church militant, we are to keep looking to the one at the front.
We are to keep looking to Jesus, our lion from the tribe of Judah. And we're to keep confessing him as the author and the finisher of our faith.
Because he is the one, and this is what it's all pointing to, he is the one who has set us free, and he is the one who will lead us home. He is the one who has set us free, and he is the one who will lead us home.
[30:54] He has taken us, as it was with John Bunyan, he has taken us from the city of destruction, and he will lead us all the way to the celestial city. And that's what we'll see next week.

Because we'll see next week that the one leading us will lead us one by one by one time. Until we join the church triumphant in glory.
And we'll say with John, after this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no man could number. Well, we'll leave it there this evening.
That's the church militant. Well, may the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, as thy people living in this world, a world full of trial, a world full of tribulation, but help us, we pray, to keep fighting the good fight of faith.
Help us to know that we are sealed, sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, and that our seal is a seal of sovereignty, a seal of security, and a seal of surety, that we are those who will not, be left behind.
[32:07] We are those, O Lord, who are in that number, and we thank thee and we praise thee, that thou art one who is gathering us, gathering his jewels and his crown, and help us then, we pray, to know that thou art the God who is building his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Help us then, as thy people, to keep looking to our leader, our commander-in-chief, the author and the finisher of our faith, the lion of the tribe of Judah, and the Lord, help us to keep our eyes upon him, and to know that he goes before us.
He is the one who has set the captives free, and help us to follow in his footsteps, all the way towards the celestial city. Keep us, Lord, we pray, because, Lord, we know that we cannot keep ourselves, and help us to be faithful, faithful to Jesus, in our work, our witness, and our worship.
Go before us and we pray. Bless us together, we ask, for we ask it in Jesus' name, and for his sake. Amen. Well, we'll bring our service to a conclusion this evening.

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We're going to sing the words of Psalm 68. Psalm 68, page 303 in the Scottish Psalter. Psalm 68, we're singing from verse 18 down to the verse mark 20.
[33:38] Thou hast, O Lord, most glorious, ascended up on high, and in triumph victorious led, captive captivity. Thou hast received gifts for men, for such as did rebel, yea, even for them that God the Lord in midst of them might dwell.

So we'll sing down to the verse mark 20 of Psalm 68, to God's praise. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. For such a child still rebel. Give him for them, That God the Lord in midst of them might dwell.
[35:15] Thirsty the Lord who is to us, Of our salvation God, Who daily with his benefits As plentiously doth Lord.

The key of salvation is the God, To this our God most strong, And unto God the Lord from death, And the issues to belong.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God the Father, And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.

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