

## Understanding Revelation Part 21

### The Kind of People God Uses

Revelation 14:1-15

I'm going to begin this morning with a quote from a well-known theologian – Charles Schultz. In one of his “Peanuts” comic strips, Charlie Brown is sitting in his bean bag chair in front of the television when his sister Sally enters the room.

Sally: “I memorized the Bible verse we were supposed to memorize for Sunday”

Charlie: “What verse?”

Sally: “I don’t know, now you made me forget. Maybe it was something Moses said, or something from the Book of Re-evaluation”

Charlie: Forgetting is not always a bad thing.”

#### The Book of Re-evaluation. In many ways that is the perfect description

The Book of Revelation is more than just a peek into future events.

It is a book that was written to the early church – and to us – as a tool that we can use to re-evaluate our walk with Jesus.

And perhaps, the passage that we will look at this morning provides us with one of the best opportunities that we’ll have to do just that.

The number of 144,000 should sound familiar to us - we were introduced to this group in chapter 7.

Although a few commentators attempt to make the case that the 144,000 here comprise a different group of people than the one from chapter 7, there is nothing in the text that would lead us to that conclusion.

In fact, there are a number of similarities between the two groups to lead us to believe that they are indeed the same. In addition to the fact that both groups consist of 144,000 men, both groups have been sealed on the forehead with the seal of God. Like we’ve seen so many other times in the book of Revelation, John is merely allowed to view this same group of people from a different vantage point than the one he had earlier.

In chapter 7, they were sealed by God to protect them during a period of tribulation that was to come upon the earth.

Now we see this same group of men following that period of tribulation.

There are several pieces of information that allow us to determine the timing of this event.

#### Timing –

##### 1. Jesus is standing on Mount Zion

Standing is the posture of victory and both Jesus and the 144,000 demonstrate that they are overcomers and have achieved victory.

Throughout the Old Testament prophets, Mount Zion is pictured as the place where Messiah would come as the deliverer of Israel and where He would gather together His people.

Let me just share two passages that illustrate that idea.

(Psalm 2:6) – “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”

(Micah 4:6-7) – In that day, declares the Lord, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted; and the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore.

There is some disagreement among commentators as to whether Mount Zion here is the earthly Mount Zion or the heavenly Mount Zion described in Hebrews 12.

The context seems to portray this as an event that takes place on earth, but where the participants are also aware of what is going on in heaven.

That would not be altogether different than what happens when we worship.

Although we are physically present here on earth, our prayers and our praise rise up and come before the throne of God in heaven.

In any case, what we can learn and apply from this passage really isn’t dependent on whether this event takes place here on earth, in heaven, or in both places at the same time. What is significant, however, is that this event...

##### 2. Occurs in connection with the return of Jesus to establish His earthly kingdom

Regardless of exactly where this event takes place, it is clear that it is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to return to this earth to establish His earthly kingdom – the same event that, as we have seen, was also pictured by the Old Testament prophets.

As we determined earlier in our study, the return of Jesus will occur after a period of tribulation and after the events associated with the sixth seal.

We also learned that three major events would occur simultaneously, or at least very close together, upon His return:

- o Jesus will establish His eternal reign
- o The ungodly will be judged
- o Christ followers will be rewarded

When we put this together with what we learned about the 144,000 back in Revelation 7 we can step back and see the big picture here.

These 144,000, who were sealed by God for their protection prior to a period of tribulation on earth have all been preserved by God through that tribulation

And now stand with Jesus, triumphant, victorious and worshipping.

That fact reveals much to us both about the nature of God and about the kind of men that God uses to carry out His purposes and plans.

And both of those aspects of this event are critical in helping us to re-evaluate our lives.

### WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD

There are many things that we can learn about God from this passage, but I want to focus on just one:

**\*God protects those whom he has “called out”**

As we saw back in chapter 7, these 144,000 men from every tribe of Israel had been called out by God and given a task by Him.

Although the text doesn’t allow us to determine with any specificity the exact nature of that task, it appears that it has something to do with the salvation of Israel.

But regardless of the exact nature of their task, what we can see is that God has protected every one of them.

There are not 143,999 left.

Every single one of these men who had been sealed by God for their protection had been preserved by God through the tribulation they endured.

That ought to be a tremendous encouragement to every one of us who have committed our lives to Jesus.

I want to remind all of us, however, that just because God physically protected this group of 144,000 from physical harm during this period of tribulation, does not mean that He will always protect His children from experiencing physical harm, or even death.

We’ve already seen in Revelation that there are going to be a large number of Christ followers who will be persecuted and even die as a result of their faith in Jesus.

And we know that Jesus told His followers that they would have tribulation while they are in this world.

But what God has promised to do is to protect and preserve that which is eternal – our souls.

We’re reminded of these familiar words of Jesus:

**John 10:27-29** – *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*

Because our salvation is completely God’s work, there is nothing that we can do or that anyone else can do to undo what God has done.

And we can have great confidence that God has both the desire and the power to preserve our salvation through whatever circumstances that we might face in life.

I know that right now many of you are going through some very difficult circumstances in your life.

But let me encourage you by reminding you that the character of God Himself guarantees that God is going to protect and preserve you through those circumstances, regardless of their outcome.

As significant as what we learn about God from this passage is, the part of this passage that is the most helpful in the process of re-evaluating our lives is...

### WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT THE KIND OF PEOPLE GOD USES

We’re looking at the first of three separate visions that we find here in chapter 14.

These represent three of the seven sub-scenes in the interlude that stretches from chapter 12 to chapter 15.

In the first three sub-scenes in chapters 12 and 13, we saw Satan at work, with much of his work being carried out by his agents – the two beasts who represented the Antichrist and the false prophet.

Here in chapter 14, by contrast, we see God at work.

And He also accomplishes His work through actions that are carried out by His agents – the 144,000, and by some angels that we’ll look at in more detail the next two weeks.

That is why our passage this morning is so relevant for us.

Those of us who are Christ followers are also God's agents who have been "called" by Him and tasked with carrying out His purposes and plans.

God has called every one of us to make disciples.

But He has also placed each of us in unique places and gifted us uniquely so that the way we carry out that common task will be different for each one of us.

And the description of the character of these 144,000 men here in chapter 14 will help us to develop the kind of character that we will need in order to be effective as God's agents.

The consistent pattern throughout Scripture is that God equips and develops us after He calls us to a task:

- He takes a murderer with a speech impediment and develops him into the man who leads His people out of bondage in Egypt.
- He takes a young shepherd boy and develops him into a king over His people and into someone that he can call "a man after my heart".
- He takes a group of uneducated fisherman and a conniving tax collector, among others, and develops them into a group of men who will be responsible for keeping the kingdom of God alive after the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- He takes a man who was a zealous persecutor of the early church and develops him into a man who writes what becomes a significant portion of the Bible while planting churches all over the known world of his time.

So let's see the kind of character that God developed in these 144,000 men and see how we can apply that in our own lives as we serve as God's agents.

The kind of people that God uses:

### 1. Purchased

Twice in this passage the 144,000 are referred to as "redeemed".

In verse 3, they are described as "redeemed from the earth" and then in verse 4, they are described as "redeemed from mankind".

The word translated "redeemed" is a commerce term that originally meant to buy something in the marketplace.

This particular word is not used all that frequently in the New Testament, but we can get a better idea of its meaning by looking at one other place where it is used:

(1 Cor 6:19-20) – *You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*

The word "bought" in this passage is the same word translated "redeemed" in Revelation 14.

The idea here is that since Jesus purchased us for Himself with His shed blood, we no longer belong to ourselves, but rather we belong to Him.

That same concept is further emphasized here in Revelation 14 with the seal on the foreheads of the 144,000.

One purpose of a seal is to signify ownership.

The fact that the 144,000 are sealed with the name of Jesus and the Father indicates that they belong to Him.

If I really want to be used by God then one of the first things that I must do is to develop the right attitude – one that is focused on God and not on me.

I must consider that all that I am and that all that I have do not belong to me – they belong to God. My time is not my own. It belongs to God. My talents and gifts are not my own. They belong to God.

My money and possessions are not my own. They belong to God.

Once I have developed that mindset, then God can use me effectively as His agent.

### 2. Praising

The underlying text for verses 2 and 3 is very difficult to translate and therefore it is difficult to ascertain exactly who is performing each of the actions described there.

The most likely explanation is that the 144,000 are physically on the earth and that they hear voices and singing from heaven.

But it is almost impossible to determine who the "they" are in verse 3 that are singing a new song before the throne.

What is clear, however, is that the 144,000 are intimately involved in this process of praising God.

And there are two aspects of this praise that I want to focus on briefly.

First is the concept of a "new song".

We've already seen another new song in Revelation 5, where the four living creature and the 24 elders sang a new song before the throne.

We also see the idea of a new song throughout the Psalms.

In each case, those songs are related to God's deliverance of His people.

In Greek, there are several words that can be translated “new.”

The one that John uses here is the one that refers to that which is fresh and new in quality rather than something that is created new from scratch.

It is a new song because it is based on a deeper understanding and experience of the person and works of God which results in a fresh, new response to God.

Perhaps some of you have experienced that right here at FFM.

Maybe that occurred even as we are singing a well-known song that you’ve sung many times before.

But as you sing that song, God reveals something new and fresh about Himself and you find that you are no longer merely mindlessly repeating the words to that song, but that now you are truly responding to God in a new and fresh way as you sing.

That could be a “new song.”

**Second, is the idea that only the 144,000 can learn this new song.**

Although I can’t tell you why only the 144,000 could learn the song, I think I can help us to understand why that is significant to us.

The key is the word “learn”. That Greek word means “to appropriate to oneself ... through experience or practice.”

It can also mean “to hear deeply”. It is the same word that Jesus used in this familiar passage:

**(Matt 11:29)** – *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

Having lived through God’s mighty deliverance, these 144,000 are uniquely qualified to experience the reality and deep meaning of the song.

The same is true for us.

It is only as we serve God as His agents that we can fully experience Him and hear Him deeply.

It is through serving Him that we obtain a deeper, more personal understanding of who He is.

It is only as we experience His provision, His equipping and His deliverance first hand that we are truly able to sing that new song and give Him the praise that He so richly deserves.

### **3. Pure**

There are a couple of places in our passage that describe the moral purity of the 144,000. The most difficult to deal with is verse 4: It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.

The first part of the verse is pretty clear.

These are men who have not defiled themselves in their relationships with women.

The second part of the verse – they are virgins – is a bit more problematic.

What I can say with confidence is that the Bible is not saying that it is necessary to be a virgin to be a Christ follower.

That is absolutely clear from the rest of Scripture.

What I can also say with great confidence is that this passage does not in any way establish the idea of some kind of “super Christians” who have obtained some preferred position before God because they are celibate.

I don’t want to preclude that God could choose to only use celibate Israelites for this particular task if He choose to do so.

After all we see examples in the Scriptures like the Nazirites who were separated to God for a specific task and who vowed to God not to shave their head or to drink wine.

Neither of those actions were required of the entire Israelite population nor were the Nazirites the only ones who could serve God.

So it is certainly possible that this particular group of men will be literal virgins.

But the larger point here is that these men are pure in every area of their lives.

No doubt that this is intended to provide us with a contrast to those who will engage in both physical and spiritual adultery with Babylon as we’ll see in future weeks.

We also know that Israel is frequently called “virgin Israel” in the Old Testament as a picture of her faithfulness to God.

So it seems likely that the term virgin is applied here more in a spiritual than a physical sense, in much the same way that Paul used that same word: **(2 Cor 11:2)** – *For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.*

Paul is clearly not writing here only to those who were physically celibate.

The idea of purity is also expressed in verse 5.

These men don’t lie and they are blameless.

We need to discuss the idea of being blameless for a moment.

The word literally means “without blemish”.

It obviously doesn’t mean that these men were sinless since the Bible is clear that “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” (Romans 3:23)

But the idea here is that as others view their lives, there is no blemish that would distract from their purpose of pointing people to Jesus. In other words, their conduct is consistent with their allegiance to Jesus.

If we really want to be used by God, then we must live our lives with purity so that they do not provide any kind of blemish that would distract from Jesus.

#### 4. Pursuing

If we don't get anything else today, we need to make sure we grasp this point. In verse 4, we find this astonishing statement: It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

Isn't that amazing?

These men were able to be used by God because they pursued Jesus wherever He went.

They didn't allow anything in their life to hinder them in their pursuit of Him.

In a sense, everything else that we've looked at so far is really wrapped up in this one characteristic of the kind of people that God can use.

Most of us are probably familiar with these words of Jesus:

(Lk 9:23) – *And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."*

Is there something that is holding you back from following Jesus?

Some possession, some activity, some relationship, some sin, some thought, some right?

If so, then if you really want to be used by God then you need to let go of that, give it up so that you can follow Jesus.

#### 5. Perpetuating

This last characteristic is described at the end of verse 4: *These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb,*

The key word here is firstfruits.

As we see how that term is used elsewhere in Scripture we find that there are two significant aspects to that concept.

First, it refers to the initial harvest of the crop which matured first.

It was only a small portion of the entire harvest and indicated that there was much more to come.

Since we know that these 144,000 men are from the twelve tribes of Israel, it seems that as firstfruits, they are somehow used by God in the process of bring Israel to salvation, an outcome predicted by both the Old Testament prophets and by Paul, when He wrote these words: (Rom 11:26) - *And in this way all Israel will be saved...*

Although we don't know exactly how these men will be used in that process, it's not hard to imagine how a group of men who are so totally sold out to Jesus will have a tremendous impact on their Israelite brothers and sisters as they persevere through a period of tribulation and remain faithful to Jesus.

As we've talked about for the last three weeks, this inexpressible gift that we have been given in Jesus is not just for us.

It is to be passed on to others.

The entire task of making disciples that has been given to all of us is all about perpetuating Jesus in the life of others.

And it's not hard for us to imagine how God can use each one of us when we are totally sold out to Him and how we can have a tremendous impact on the lives of others as well.

Second, Firstfruits were also offered to God as a sacrifice and as an expression of being totally separated and set apart to Him.

For us, the idea of being firstfruits is that we offer up every area of our lives as an offering to God to be used by Him for His purposes and His glory – our personal lives, our families, our work, our hobbies, everything.

If you're a Christ-follower, then Jesus has "called" you and tasked you with making disciples.

And in order for us to be effective as His agents in that process, we need to mature in our walk with Him so that we can be the purchased, praising, pure, pursuing, perpetuating people that God can use for His glory.

So let's take some time this week to honestly re-evaluate our lives before God and then make whatever changes we need to make to develop those traits in our lives.