The Significance of the Symbolism (Revelation 19:7; Galatians 6:16).

They are a symbolic number representing all of the redeemed, the sons of the living God (Hosea 1:10). This number suggests perfect symmetry and completeness as well as the vastness of the multitude of the sealed. Twelve is the number of ancient Israel, based on the twelve tribes. It is also the number of the city which had foundations of jasper stones, whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10). “And these all having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us that they without us should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40). They are waiting for the completion or perfection of the number of God’s people, namely “us.” Despite all the faithful victories and the good reports of the faithful of old, they are not complete or made perfect “without us.” This is a type of corporate oneness revealed by God’s people in rare times of spirituality and exemplified by Christ’s prayer for us (see Daniel 9:5-11; Ezra 9:3-15; John 17:20-23).

This same oneness is described in Revelation 7:4-8 with the final sealing of God’s people. When this sealing is finished, the number of the redeemed is complete, “the mystery of God should be finished” (Revelation 10:7). All who will make up the new Jerusalem city, all who have and would ever accept the gift of salvation have done so and the four winds can be let loose.

Thus, 144,000 becomes the number of those who are the “sealed.” It is a number which symbolizes the completion or perfection of the redeemed of all generations. When the 144,000 are “sealed out of every tribe of the sons of Israel” (Revelation 7:4), the four winds can be let loose. All who have placed their faith in Christ as Savior have God’s mark in their foreheads.

The Great Multitude

Consider some closing thoughts of encouragement as John looks upon the great multitude of the redeemed and points out some important characteristics about them:

1) First, he says that “no man could number” them (see Revelation 7:9). This gives hope to all. Though the road to heaven is “narrow,” there will be countless millions saved at last (see Matthew 7:13-14).

2) John also says that the redeemed come from “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Revelation 7:9). Here it is shown that “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34-35). Every race of people, nation, kindred or tongue is granted a place in His kingdom.

3) Then John sees that the redeemed are “clothed with white robes” (Revelation 7:9). This indicates that they have received the free gift of the cleansing “blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 1:4; see also Isaiah 1:18). They do not depend on salvation by their works, but they cry, “Salvation to our God . . . and unto the Lamb” (Revelation 7:10).

4) Though they have “come out of great tribulation,” they will not hunger or thirst anymore (see Revelation 7:14, 16). Neither shall they know sorrow anymore, for “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17). This is a tremendous hope for us now. Someday soon life is going to be different. Hurt, pain and sorrow; sickness, mourning and heartache were never in His plan for us. And soon, very soon, all things will be new. This is the closing message of Revelation 7.

The 144,000 and the Great Multitude

Who Shall be Able to Stand? Revelation 7 can be seen as an interlude, an interruption of sorts, to the seven seals. In this chapter John is answering the question put forth in the last verse of chapter six, “who shall be able to stand?” (Revelation 6:17). This being the case, the interpretation of Revelation 7 is bound up in the context of the sixth seal.

The Second Coming of Christ

The sixth seal describes the second coming of Christ. As He approaches the earth there is tremendous commotion in sky, land and sea. Stars fall and entire mountains and islands are moved out of place (see Revelation 6:13-14; Matthew 24:29-30; Mark 13:24-26).

So awesome and terrifying is the sight that “the great men, . . . and the mighty men” call for the “mountains and rocks” to fall on them rather than face God, who sits on the “throne,” and the “Lamb,” who is on His “right side” (Revelation 6:15-16; Matthew 24:29; Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62). As “every eye” sees Christ coming, the lost who have survived “the seven last plagues,” and who have just “blasphemed the name of God,” now long to “hide” from “the wrath of the Lamb” (Revelation 1:7; 15:1; 16:9; 6:15-16).

The Servants of God

In this context the question is asked, “who shall be able to stand?”

The Significance of the Symbolism

The symbolism of the 144,000 is significant, representing unity, perfection and the completion of God’s church. Revelation 6:11 indicates that before God’s martyrs can be avenged and enter into the heavenly city, “the brethren that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled” or “complete.” (This can infer their number or the character being “fulfilled” or made up.)

The book of Hebrews indicates that the faithful of past ages are waiting for this “promise” of the “new heaven and new earth” (Hebrews 11:39). It speaks of the “number of the children of Israel” (Revelation 7:4). This number suggests perfect symmetry and completeness as well as the vastness of the multitude of the sealed. Twelve is the number of ancient Israel, based on the twelve tribes. It is also the number of the city which had foundations of jasper stones, whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10). “And these all having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us that they without us should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40). They are waiting for the completion or perfection of the number of God’s people, namely “us.” Despite all the faithful victories and the good reports of the faithful of old, they are not complete or made perfect “without us.” This is a type of corporate oneness revealed by God’s people in rare times of spirituality and exemplified by Christ’s prayer for us (see Daniel 9:5-11; Ezra 9:3-15; John 17:20-23).

This same oneness is described in Revelation 7:4-8 with the final sealing of God’s people. When this sealing is finished, the number of the redeemed is complete, “the mystery of God should be finished” (Revelation 10:7). All who will make up the new Jerusalem city, all who
The qestion is answered twice in chapter 7, first by the angel with the words, “the servants of our God” (Revelation 7:2-3), and then whenJohn says, “I beheld, and lo, a great multitude who "stood before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9).

Notice that the question is: "Who shall be able to stand" before the "throne" and before the "Lamb"? (Revelation 6:16-17).

And it is answered twice: 1) "the servants of God," “an hundred and forty and four thousand” (Revelation 7:3-4), 2) "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood" “before the throne" “and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).

Two Groups of Redeemed

John’s vision is consistent with the rest of the Bible which pictures two groups of people who shall be able to stand before “Him that sitteth on the throne,” and the “Lamb” at the Second Coming: (1) Those whose hope is in Christ and are “alive” when He comes, (2) those who “sleep in Jesus” and are resurrected at His second coming (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; see also 1 Corinthians 15:12-23, 51-52).

The Seal of the Living God

The central focus of this chapter is the seal of God which is placed upon the “foreheads” of the servants of God (see Revelation 7:2-3). What is this seal of God? The Bible gives four meanings to the sealing which all seem to apply to this chapter.1

1) In the book of Revelation the seal of God in the forehead is the same as the name of God in the forehead (compare Revelation 7:2-8; 14:1; 22:4). This word name in both the Old Testament and the New Testament means “character.” It describes those who have developed, through the Spirit of God, the attributes of His character; they have the mind of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:30; Philippians 2:5).

2) A seal is the same as a “mark” or “sign” and infers ownership and dedication. Abraham was to circumcise his house as a “sign” or “seal” that he belonged to God (see Romans 4:11; Genesis 17:9-12). The high priest was to bear the engraving, “Holiness to the Lord” on his forehead as a sign of his dedication to God (see Exodus 28:36-38).

3) The Bible also speaks of the concept of a seal or mark as offering protection to its worshipers from the beast’s persecution. Yet they are not protected from the persecution of the beast (see Revelation 13:15-17; 20:4). Likewise, the “mark” of the beast gives protection to its worshipers from the beast’s persecution. Yet they are not protected from the plagues of the beast (see Revelation 15:1; 16:1-11).

4) Another aspect of sealing that gives insight to this chapter is that of genuineness. Documents are “sealed” up to protect them from change or alteration. Thus God’s servants are sealed as a guarantee that they will remain righteous and loyal to God (see Revelation 3:12; 22:11).

5) And finally the sealing of God’s people denotes their obedience to Him as faithful “servants” (Revelation 7:3; Romans 6:16). They are to be sealed by the Holy Spirit which is “given to them that obey Him” (Acts 5:32; see also Ephesians 4:30; Revelation 14:12).

The 144,000 — Literal or Symbolic?

One question concerning this chapter which might be more challenging is: Are the 144,000 literal or symbolic? Here are a few thoughts to consider:

1) Usually what John hears is the same as what he then sees; i.e., John “heard” a “great voice” like a “trumpet” and then “saw” the “Son of man” (Revelation 1:10-13). John “heard” the number of “horsemen” and then “saw” the horses in the vision (Revelation 9:16-17). It is significant to note that John first “heard” the number of them that were sealed, and then he “beheld” a “great multitude which no man could number” (Revelation 7:4, 9).

2) In Revelation 14:1-5, the 144,000 are shown again. This time it is on “mount Sion” with the “Lamb,” a scene future to the Second Coming (see Hebrews 12:22-23).

Here the description of the 144,000 seems to be a picture of all the redeemed. Notice their characteristics:

a) They have the Father’s name written in their foreheads (Revelation 22:4).

b) They were redeemed from earth (Isaiah 43:1; 1 Peter 1:18-19).

c) They are virgins (2 Corinthians 11:2-4).

d) They follow the Lamb (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

e) They are firstfruits (Jeremiah 2:3; James 1:17-18).

f) They have no guile in their mouths (1 Peter 3:10).

g) They stand without fault before God (Jude 24).

3) Another important insight to consider is that the sealed are from the “tribes of the children of Israel” (Revelation 7:4). Since the Old Testament church was designated as the twelve “tribes of Israel” and the New Testament church is likewise described as “the twelve tribes scattered abroad” and “the Israel of God” (James 1:1; Galatians 3:29; 6:15-16; see also Matthew 21:43; Romans 2:28-29; 1 Peter 2:9-10). This would therefore allow the 144,000, which are from the twelve tribes of Israel, to symbolize all the saved, both the old and the New Testament.

4) Again consider that the seal of “the servants of our God” (Revelation 7:3) includes all who have died with “faith” in Christ as well as those who are alive at His coming (see Romans 4:11; Hebrews 11:13; Ephesians 1:10-14; 4:30). This is an important point. Every person who stands before the throne in heaven will have the seal of God’s “name” in their foreheads (see Revelation 22:4). This seal of God is equivalent to having our names written and retained in the “Lamb’s book of life” (see Psalm 69:28; Philippians 4:3; Luke 10:20; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15). Therefore, the sealing includes all of the redeemed, not just an end-time group.

5) The “great multitude” is said to have come out of “great tribulation” (Revelation 7:14). God’s faithful servants in all generations, including the last generation, will have gone through “great tribulation.”

1 Much of the insight in this section is owed to the writer in Symposium on Revelation, book 1, pp. 254-256.