

Episode 261

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Today we're continuing in our series of End Times, popular questions about the End Times, and kind of sort of trying to go through the series chronologically according to the book of Revelation. But in this episode, we're going to be covering sort of two different heroes, so to speak, of the Revelation. We're talking about some good guys today, and where exactly they fall in with the rest of tribulation isn't entirely clear, but important nonetheless. So Jeff, the managing editor of BibleRef.com, and Kevin, the editor-in-chief of Got Questions Ministries, are joining me today. We're going to be discussing the 144,000 and the two witnesses, with the main passages being Revelation 7 for the 144,000 and Revelation 11 for the two witnesses.

Shea Houdmann

So 144,000—Jeff will cover it here in just a second—but it's one of those things, as you read the passage, it sure seems clear—144,000 Jews listed from these various—12,000 from each of the different twelve tribes—but there's enough kind of, I wouldn't say mystery, but unclarity going on that leads to a lot of confusion. And of course, we have our Jehovah's Witnesses friends who have added a lot to the confusion, and also people who just refuse to interpret the passage literally, and find any and every excuse to interpret it in any way other than what the passage actually says. So Jeff, start us off. Who are the 144,000, and what's their role in the end times?

Jeff Laird

Well, they're not really mentioned very often. There's a couple mentions in chapter 7, and then you get a mention in chapter 14 about these. But the information that's there doesn't seem to be very allegorical. It does not have the same flavor of mystery and symbolism as things like the seven-headed dragon, or the woman clothed with the sun, and things like that. In Revelation chapter 7, we'll start in verse 4, and I'll start in verse 3. There's angels who are proclaiming God's message during this particular phase of the tribulation. And it says, "...saying, Do not harm the earth or the seed of the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." Verse 4 says, "...and I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel." And then it goes on to say that there are 12,000 sealed from the tribes of Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. And what comes right after this is the famous verse, one of my favorite verses, about seeing a multitude that

you can't number from every people, nation, tribe, and tongue. So it's given a very specific number, 144,000, 12,000 from each of these 12 tribes.

Jeff Laird

And the next time we hear about them in chapter 14 is when we're hearing a little bit more about what their role was. Verse 14, chapter 1 says, "...then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters, and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless."

Jeff Laird

So that phrasing is where we see some of the confusions that come in with this 144,000. In the context of what we see, it seems pretty clear that at some point in the Tribulation, God is going to call this 144,000 number from the Jewish nation, and a lot of the tribal identities right now have been lost. A lot of people have no idea what tribe they would be or could be in, but God knows, and he would be calling these 144,000 to act as witnesses during this time. So presumably they'll be preaching the gospel, they'll be talking about the truth of God, they'll be acting out or speaking out against some of the abuses that might be happening under the Antichrist, and these are going to be literal people. It seems like that's exactly what they are. They're actual people, actual Jewish people, actual male Jewish people, actual virgin male Jewish people. So it's very difficult to look at this and say that something in there is not what it says it is, because it seems so clear.

Jeff Laird

The confusions come up in what we read in that stuff in chapter 14. This is where Jehovah's Witnesses get the idea that what this means is that only 144,000 people are truly going to be with Christ in heaven. That does not necessarily mean they believe only those 144,000 can live forever, but they believe that those are the only ones who are actually going to be with Christ, which is strange because they would say that as you're reading the verses, you're switching back and forth between literal and figurative interpretation literally in the middle of phrases. So they're literally 144,000, but it's not literally Jewish men, and so on and so forth.

Jeff Laird

It's something that you hear a lot. That number is very strongly associated with the Jehovah's Witnesses for that reason, and they've made lots of different arguments about how that works and how that doesn't work. But what we do know is that these are going to be people who are called out during the end times from Israel, and their job is going to be to speak and advocate on behalf of God, and they're going to be sealed in some sense, which either means they're going to be completely protected from the bad things that happen, or they're just sealed in the sense that they are clearly marked as gods. So it's not that complicated to understand, but there's still a lot of mystery about exactly who they are and what they're going to do.

Shea Houdmann

For sure. I mean, one of the things I love about Revelation 7 is that you have these 144,000 Witnesses, then in the very next verse it says, and I saw people that I could not number. I mean, so possibly the fruit of the 144,000's ministry. That's a theory out there.

Shea Houdmann

One question that we get a lot about with the 12 tribes, and you get to look at the various lists of the 12 tribes throughout the Bible, they're not always exactly the same. And this list here in Revelation 7 has a couple of interesting points. Like one, the tribe of Dan isn't listed at all. And then second, instead of Ephraim and Manasseh, the two sons of Joseph, which were made into tribes, it has Manasseh and then Joseph. So Jeff or Kevin, in your research, find any good explanations for those two interesting diversions from the typical 12 tribes list?

Jeff Laird

Well, I think one of the things that's possible is that you see some descriptions of Dan negatively in the Old Testament, talking about being a snake in the path and so on and so forth. Some people speculate that what that means is that if the Antichrist is actually ethnically Jewish, that that could suggest that the Antichrist is from the tribe of Dan. And for that reason, symbolically or otherwise, God just decides that he's not going to include them in what's going on. Obviously, that doesn't mean that people from the tribe of Dan cannot be saved. This is just these 144,000 who are marked out for special purpose.

Jeff Laird

That's one of the suggestions that's been brought up. It's probably the most common one that I hear, but not necessarily connected to Antichrist. Just this idea of Dan being a serpent, that there's something regarding the tribe of Dan. When you read the book of Judges, the tribe of Dan was one of the earliest to really get heavily into idolatry. Basically, they arrive in the promised

land, they instantly switch over to idolatry, and they kind of never go back. So it may be that they just sort of forfeited their place in this part of the tribulation because of that. But no real clear answers from Scripture on why one is in there and the others aren't.

Shea Houdmann

And with Joseph being mentioned instead of Ephraim, the only explanation I found is that that's just Ephraim was the dominant tribe of the two sons of Joseph, and so Ephraim is just called Joseph in that context. I don't think the Bible says anything about Joseph having any kids from other than Ephraim and Manasseh, so that seems to be the explanation. But it is odd. Joseph being labeled a tribe is not very common in Scripture at all.

Jeff Laird

And Manasseh is put there in place of Dan. So you've got both of Joseph sort of in there, but not Dan, and we really don't know why.

Shea Houdmann

Thank you, Jeff. The 144,000 is one of those issues that just really—a lot of questions. In this episode, we're kind of discussing who are the good guys of the tribulation. That brings us to the second part of this episode, the two witnesses. So, Kevin, why don't you take this one? Who are the two witnesses? What can we know for sure about them according to the book of Revelation?

Kevin Stone

Well, sure. I'd be glad to talk about the two witnesses, and by means of introduction, I'll just say I'm really glad—I know you guys are too—that God always has a witness in whatever age there is, whatever culture, there's always a witness for God. So, even in the tribulation time, we've got the 144,000 that are speaking God's word. We have these two witnesses now that are speaking God's word. And what we know about them comes from Revelation chapter 11, which says, I will give power to my two witnesses. They will prophesy 1,260 days. So, that's three and a half years. Clothed in sackcloth. So, they're going to be making quite a statement, even in how they appear, how they dress.

Kevin Stone

And then the passage goes on to say, these are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth. If anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies. If anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner. These have power to shut heaven so that no rain falls in the days of their prophecy, and they have power over waters to turn them to blood and to strike the earth with all plagues as often as they desire.

Kevin Stone

So, these two witnesses, as they are ministering and sharing God's word to a wicked and rebellious world during the tribulation, they have been given much power. They have much authority over the natural realm, and they can choose to bring a plague at any time that they desire. This is going to be an amazing ministry during an amazing time during this tribulation.

Kevin Stone

Now, it's specified that they're going to be ministering for three and a half years, and we believe, I believe, that this is going to be the first half of the tribulation period, the first half of that seven-year period. A lot of people will get saved during this time. The remnant of the Jews, probably getting saved during this time. A vast number of Gentiles, as well, getting saved because these signs are going to be getting people's attention. These witnesses are going to be very powerful in their messaging.

Kevin Stone

It could be that, and I've seen some commentators actually write about this, that they are instrumental in getting that treaty made at the beginning of the tribulation between this political leader, who turns out to be the Antichrist, and the nation of Israel. So, they're instrumental, possibly, in establishing peace, which then would lead to the building of the temple, the rebuilding of that end-times, tribulation-era temple.

Kevin Stone

But the focus of that first half of the tribulation will be all the people that are getting saved through the 144,000, through these two witnesses, and then they die. Now, I believe this happens at the midpoint of the tribulation. So, the Antichrist starts showing his true colors. He commits that abomination of desolation. He kills these two witnesses, and he starts consolidating his power and sets himself up as God, even in the temple. Well, Revelation chapter 11 then says this, when they finish their testimony, and that's an interesting phrase, that these two witnesses have a certain amount of time that they minister. When they finish that testimony time, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them, and kill them. Their dead bodies are going to be lying in the street for three and a half days. Nobody is going to be burying them. And Scripture says, actually, that the people of the world are going to be celebrating their death and sending gifts to each other. It's going to be a global holiday because, Scripture says, these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth. What a thorn in the side of a wicked world these two witnesses were, so much so that when they are destroyed by the Antichrist, everybody's glad. All the wickedness are glad, and they were tormenting us.

Kevin Stone

And you guys remember when Elijah's ministry, when he ran into King Ahab, Ahab said, oh, you're the one who is troubling Israel. You know, you're the troublemaker, Elijah. This is what wicked people always do. The wicked always look at the righteous and say, you guys are causing a lot of trouble. If you would just get out of the way, we'd have a perfect world. Of course, it's just the opposite, but that's how they see it. They're looking at these two witnesses as the ones who are causing all the trouble. They're very glad when they're off the scene, when they're dead.

Kevin Stone

But then their story is not over yet. Revelation 11, verse 11, after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them. They stood on their feet. Great fear fell on those who saw them. And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, come up here, come home, basically. They ascended to heaven and a cloud. Their enemy saw them. The same hour there was a great earthquake. A tenth of the city fell. In the earthquake, 7,000 people were killed. The rest were afraid, gave glory to the God of heaven. So even in their death and resurrection, they're pointing people to God. And what an incredible ministry these two have in the end times. God always has a witness, and these two seem like they're going to be doing a bang-up job in spreading the gospel.

Shea Houdmann

For sure, Kevin. Thank you for that summary. I find it interesting that whenever we get questions about the two witnesses, it's not so much about what they do or what their role is. Everyone wants to know who they are. There's all sorts of theories. You hear Moses and Elijah. Elijah, because the calling down fire from heaven to destroy people, that's kind of what Elijah was known for. Then Moses, because of the ten plagues of Egypt. So there's these commonalities. The other most frequent one you hear is Enoch and Elijah, because Enoch and Elijah were the two people who God took to heaven without dying. So perhaps God was preparing Enoch and Elijah for this specific role. But there's actually nothing in this passage that hints at any sort of special identity. They could just be two nameless people, not historical, biblical character at all. But what have you found in your research? Are those the two most common theories? And which view do you lean towards, Kevin?

Kevin Stone

Well, I've heard for both those theories, and I lean toward the Enoch and Elijah theory, simply because neither of those men suffered physical death. The Book of Hebrews says it's appointed unto man once to die. And Enoch and Elijah, well, they haven't had their turn yet. So God's going to send

them back and give them a chance to actually lay down their lives. And so they too will have experienced physical death, and then that resurrection, and have that amazing ministry in the meantime. But like you say, Shea, there's nothing in the passage that hints at who they are. It's speculation.

Jeff Laird

A lot of speculation in there in general. One of the things that we don't even really know, and this is another place where traditions and assumptions start to kick in, is we usually assume that we're talking about these two preaching in the city of Jerusalem during that time. And strictly speaking, we don't know that. It says that they're going to be preaching, they're going to be witnessing. We don't necessarily know exactly where. It says that when they're killed, their bodies will be in the great city.

Jeff Laird

So some of the interesting things to think about is maybe these two are working or ministering on different sides of the earth. Maybe they're semi-independent of the things that they're doing and they're saying. And maybe when they're killed, they're dragged to the holy city that they supposedly preached about and dropped into the streets. Things like that are interesting.

Jeff Laird

It's also fun to think about the different ways that their powers could manifest themselves. Just like you were saying, when things happen, people tend to blame the messenger instead of the actual circumstance. So it's curious to think of exactly what it would mean for them to instigate things like plagues and fire coming from their mouths. There's definitely going to be something very powerful and supernatural happening because when it says that fire comes out of the mouths to consume, it then says that's how the people who attack them will be killed. So I don't think you can allegorize that sort of a thing to the point where we say, well, this is just talking about these fiery, passionate speakers who are very effective in what they're doing. I think there's going to be some serious supernatural stuff associated exactly with those guys. We just don't know exactly what.

Kevin Stone

Yeah. As far as where they're ministering, I'm going to go out on a limb and say that I think that they are actually in Jerusalem. And it's because of that statement that we read in Revelation chapter 11, how they are the two olive trees and the two lampstands. Because that goes back to the book of Zechariah. Zechariah chapter four kind of gives us a prototype even of this. One of Zechariah's visions was he saw a lampstand, he saw an olive tree there, and there was oil flowing and the lampstand continued to burn and all of that. And so Zechariah asks about the meaning of all of this. And the angel

who's talking to him says, these are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth. And then it goes on, it's that famous passage where it's not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord. And the whole point of that chapter in Zechariah is that God's going to finish the work of building the temple after the Babylonian captivity and the exiles had returned to their land. And so the lampstands there were Zerubbabel and Joshua and the rebuilding of the temple. And so God says, I'm going to complete that work.

Kevin Stone

Well, John picks up on that in the book of Revelation, uses the same kind of symbol, and that just makes me think that these two witnesses are kind of, they're standing in for Zerubbabel and Joshua and their ministry, these two witnesses in the end times, it's associated with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Again, this is conjecture, but I just, that's kind of the, that's my thinking process through it all.

Shea Houdmann

I think with technology, the witnesses, the two witnesses could be in Jerusalem, but then their message can be proclaimed all around the world. So one of the things that in this episode, we're talking about the 144,000 and the two witnesses, a frequent question we receive is how do people get saved during the tribulation? If the rapture is pre-tribulational and all the Christians are gone, well, who's there to lead people to Christ? Because Revelation talks about martyrs, people being killed for their faith in Christ. Well, if all the people are gone, well, if there's 144,000 witnesses and then these two especially powerful witnesses, there's a lot of people out there who are sharing the gospel and empowered by the Holy Spirit in amazing ways.

Shea Houdmann

So the tribulation saints, those who come to faith in Christ during the tribulation, is probably largely at the hands of the 144,000 and the two witnesses just to see how God's message, there will always be someone to declare it. And that God provides, even in the midst of the worst time in the history of the world, that God provides opportunities to be saved, opportunities to escape his wrath. And that seems to be one of the roles of the 144,000 witnesses and these two witnesses as well.

Jeff Laird

I think it's fun to notice that they're described as witnesses and other than the two witnesses using fire to protect their persons against people who try to kill them, there's nothing in there that talks about these good guys doing any sort of physical fighting. This is not, even in the end times, Christ's intention is not

for his people to try to promote the kingdom using violence. We do not, cannot fight for a physical kingdom.

Jeff Laird

So for me, it's interesting to see that even in Revelation, even when it's the Antichrist and all of that things that is happening, it's still witnesses. It's not until Christ returns in person that there's actual bloodshed and he is the one responsible for all of it. So it's encouraging to me just when I think about the things we go through in our own time to remember that no, if God wasn't asking Paul to overthrow the Roman government and he's not asking the two witnesses to take down the Antichrist, I can be pretty confident that he's not expecting me to overthrow every government in the world that doesn't sufficiently honor Christ. I can do what I need to do and let him handle the rest of it.

Shea Houdmann

Amen. So the two witnesses, the 144,000 witnesses have a special role. As I said earlier, a lot of the questions we get, well, who are the 144,000? Who are the two witnesses? That all seems pretty clear about the 144,000. They're 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel with a little question of how exactly the 12 tribes work. The two witnesses, Paul doesn't say who they are. There's lots of speculation. Like Kevin said, I probably lean towards the Enoch and Elijah view, but again, that's not explicit in scripture. But we know what the purpose of these 144,000 witnesses and the two witnesses want, to give glory to God, to point the way to Christ during a very dark and evil time the tribulation is. And so God always provides witnesses.

Shea Houdmann

I look at in the Old Testament, there's several times where it talks about on the testimony of two witnesses, things are attributed.

So maybe there's a connection there. I don't know, but God is providing people who know the gospel and will declare the gospel even in the worst time amidst the worst persecution this world's ever seen.

Shea Houdmann

So this has been the Got Questions podcast on who are the 144,000 and who are the two witnesses. Hope our conversation has been interesting and informative for you today. Got questions? The Bible has answers.

We'll help you find them.