

# ZOOM STUDY: IMPORTANT BIBLICAL SYMBOLS

## TWELVE

### INTRODUCTION

As Lutherans we believe that the Scriptures speak with clarity. We trust that in his Word the Holy Spirit has given us all the context and information we need to know to adequately understand and definitively interpret what it means. As with our study of the number seven last week, tonight we will allow Scripture to speak as to the significance of this oft-repeated number.

1.) Like the number 7, the number 12 is used throughout the Bible. Since the number seven signifies God's covenant with humanity (3 + 4 = the number of the triune God and the number of the earth/man), can you surmise what the number 12 may signify?

2.) We learn the meaning of the number 12 by seeing how it is used in Scripture. Consider just some of the occasions on which it is used:

- Jacob/Israel had 12 sons (Gen. 35:22-26)
- Moses set up 12 stone pillars at the altar on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:4)
- The high priest's breastplate contained 12 stones, one for each tribe of Israel (Ex. 28:18-21)
- The bread of the presence was baked in 12 loaves (Lev. 24:5-6)
- Joshua arranged 12 stones as a memorial at the River Jordan (Joshua 4:2-7)
- The tribes divided the promised land into 12 parts (Joshua 13-19)
- 12 bull, three facing in each of the four directions of the compass held the bronze sea (1 Kings 7:25)
- Elijah used 12 stones to build the altar to the LORD in his contest with the priests of Baal over the hearts of God's people (1 Kings 18:31)
- Paul directed King Agrippa to "the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night" (Acts 26:7).
- James addressed his letter "to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (James 1:1)
- Jesus called 12 disciples to be apostles (Matthew 10:1ff)
- Jesus promised his disciples that at the renewal of all things they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28)
- Peter commented that it was necessary to find another apostle to replace Judas, so Matthias was chosen by lot to be added to the 11 apostles (Acts 1:21,26)
- There are 24 elders (12 x 2) around the heavenly throne in John's vision (Rev. 4:4)
- The total number of God's people is given as 144,000 (12 x 12 x 1000) (Rev. 7:4)
- In the heavenly Jerusalem there are 12 gates of pearl, 12 guardian angels, 12 tribes, 12 foundations named after the 12 Apostles (Rev. 21:12-21)

3.) Consider the stipulations for and purpose of the high priest's breast-piece. Of what did those 12 stones remind him? What did it signify that he wore these stones as he ministered before the Lord? What message does it still give to leaders in the church today (cf. Philippians 1:7; 2 Cor. 11:28-29)?

4.) Review the account of the Israelites crossing the Jordan to Jericho in Joshua chapters 3 and 4. Of what would later generations be reminded when they saw these 12 memorial stones? What significance does the account have for us?

5.) Recall the details of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. What was at stake in that contest? What was the significance of Elijah's 12-stone-altar? What effect do you think it had on the Israelites who later looked at that burnt hole where the altar had stood? What does that tell us about what our God does for us and how he feels about us?

6.) In what ways is the New Testament church the same as the Old Testament church?

7.) Consider the scene in heaven where the throne of God and the Lamb are surrounded by the 24 elders in Revelation 4 and 5. Given what we've seen in the rest of Scripture who or what might this symbolize?

8.) Consider the 144,000 of Revelation 7:1-8 and . What does this figure represent? What teaching of Scripture is reflected in this number? What comfort does it bring us?

**Revelation 7:1-8** 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. <sup>2</sup> 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: <sup>3</sup> "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." <sup>4</sup> Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. <sup>5</sup> From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, <sup>6</sup> from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, <sup>7</sup> from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, <sup>8</sup> from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

*Closing Prayer: Triune God, true Lord of every tribe and people, thank you for reconciling humanity to yourself through Jesus Christ, and gathering us from the four corners of the earth to be a people set apart for yourself through faith in Jesus. Cause us always to live in heartfelt concern for your church so that its godly influence may extend across the world and through all generations. Amen.*