

Harvest and Vintage
Revelation 14
By Gary R. May
First Baptist Church of Diana, May 18, 2011

At times John used his ears to hear and at other times he used his eyes to see. In the 14th chapter John both hears and sees. Chapter 13 records his visions of evil as manifest in the beast of the sea and the beast of the earth. When the vision becomes depressing and hopeless, John sees another vision of victory and hope. He was evidently startled at the change of mental images as they immediately went from a beast to the Lamb of God. In verse 1 he describes two encouraging visions, one of a Lamb standing on Mount Zion and the other of 144,000 who have His name written on their foreheads in his company.

The Sounds of the Redeemed

Some see this Mount Zion as one on earth where Jesus will establish his government for the millennial reign. In keeping with the context of chapter 13, this does not seem plausible. In the previous vision, Satan was seen standing on the sea and on the sand of the earth both of which are shifting. It is good to remember this was not seen as a mere vision of a small body standing on a beach where the tide meets the shoreline, but a massive creature with a foot clearly on the sea and the other clearly in the sand of the earth. The vision of the Lamb, identified no doubt as Christ the Lamb of God, is seen here on the heavenly Mount Zion with full reign over all the earth.

As John saw, he also heard. The voices he heard are said to be like the sound of many waters and like the sound of thunder along with harpists playing. The sounds are alarming while they are comforting like the bitter sweetness of the Gospel. The sounds of many waters and thunder represent the awesome power of a Holy God about to rain down judgment. This judgment sits in stark contrast to the fledgling enemy of chapter 13. The sounds of redemption are drowning out the sounds of Satan's claims of dominance.

The sounds of verse 2 are sorted out in verse 3. They are not merely sounds coming from unconcerned sources; they are the songs of the redeemed. This song that was being heard above the sounds of satanic dominance was a song that could only be learned by the redeemed identified here as the 144,000. These redeemed are positioned before the throne and before the elders and before the living creatures. They have place of prominence unmatched and a song that cannot be duplicated.

Much discussion has been given to the identity of the 144,000. Historical premillennialists continue to see this group as the church. This interpretation was made clear in chapter 7 when this group was sealed. Dispensationalists, on the other hand see this group as a literal 144,000 Jewish males. Interpretations of their further descriptions typically fall according to these lines as well. If they are seen as a literal group of Jewish males, their chastity speaks of their purity. The New Testament is very clear that marriage is God's plan for the family and sexual relationships within marriage are not a defilement. Hebrews 13:4 says the marriage bed is undefiled. However,

in the dispensational interpretation, these redeemed witnesses of Christ through the tribulation period have a specific function which requires their chastity and verse 5 sees them as completely honest as well. HP's have quite a different view. They see these 144,000 as the believers of all stripes. Their chastity is seen as spiritual. Supporting Old Testament pictures of Israel as pure yet as adulterous when she worshipped pagan gods, gives clear support to this interpretation. If this imagery describes the church, the purity comes not from within the individual members of the group, but from the washing of sins by the blood of Christ. The claims of verse 5 of blamelessness cannot refer to any human except as cleansed by Christ because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The Proclamation of the Gospel

John does not give us an indication of whether the events of chapter 14 are occurring in sequence or simultaneously. The chronological sequence seems to assure he is speaking of the latter part of the tribulation period. As he sees an angel flying in mid air, he does not say whether the sounds are continuing in heaven or if they are subsiding. If they are seen as the church, it is possible that the sounds have been going on for some time yet may grow more intense as the end time approaches. The angel flying in mid-heaven is one sent to proclaim the Gospel. Among the doom and gloom of God's judgment coming both through His using of the evil forces of Satan and in His future standing before the judged, the angel proclaims the Gospel. Some have questioned whether this is the full Gospel of Jesus Christ but an objective reading of the Scripture clearly indicates the call to repentance. It is repentance from self and to following Christ that is required for salvation so this is no doubt another opportunity to turn. The plea given is for men to fear God, give Him glory, and worship the true creator of heaven and earth.

A second angel follows the first declaring defeat of Babylon the great. Babylon was often used among Jews as code language for Rome. The reference to Babylon is surely a reference to the capital city of the Persian Empire where Daniel served in the Royal court. Daniel, and the other three Hebrew children, kept themselves pure to serve Yahweh in the midst of a pagan conglomerate. Babylon was a melting pot of religious and academic ideas. The leaders had captured the brightest minds from all over the Middle East to assist in building a great empire. In doing so they had assembled a city full of pagan ritual and religion. It was a symbol of great compromise between religions. For Christians and Jews, it became a symbol of the great lure of the satanic to compromise faith in the living God and mix it with other religions. This act is highly offensive to the living God.

A Warning from Heaven

The scene of marking off servants of Satan in 13:16 is countered in 14:9-13 with a warning by a third angel. The warning is clear; if you take the mark of the beast you will suffer the wrath of God. The choices are plain; taking the mark of the beast is giving worship to the beast that is identified as Satan. Such action will draw the quick judgment of God. The judgment is pictured as "wine of the wrath of God." This wine of wrath comes unmixed and in full strength. It was common in the first century for water to be mixed with wine for purification of the water. The fermented wine would kill harmful bacteria. Often wine was mixed with herbs for medicinal purposes as well. This wine of God's wrath will not be diluted and it will not have any properties

of a sedative nature. The results of this wrath will be torment with fire and brimstone. You will want to notice this will be in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. When the wrath is metered out, those on the receiving end will not mistake the source as being any other than the God of all creation. It will be clear that this is the result of their rebelliousness against Holy, righteous God. No mention is given to the presence of the saints.

The warning also includes the length and extent of the torment. As to length, it will be forever and ever. Both the torment of hell and the limits of time seemed to be under great question and scrutiny in our generation. In recent days a popular, liberal evangelical pastor has published a bestselling book questioning the concepts of hell represented in this passage. The teaching is plain, hell is place of torment and it lasts forever. Anyone found with the mark of the beast will be banished to this place forever.

Along with the warning comes hope. Verse 12 points out the perseverance afforded to those who keep the commandments of God due to their faith in Jesus Christ. God gives sustaining grace to His servants at the moment of persecution. Can you picture Stephen as he is being stoned for preaching the truth as he saw the glory of heaven? God gave him the message and the grace necessary to maintain his faith in the face of death. So it will be for the believers who are faced with taking the mark or facing certain death. God's grace will provide the necessary strength to persevere. Here we have the doctrine of perseverance of the saints.

While the condemned of verse 11 have no rest, the saints of verse 14 are pronounced as blessed and entering into the Master's rest. As has been revealed repeatedly to the first century Christians receiving an apocalyptic writing concerning their own times and the times of the future, the reward to come is worth the suffering of the present. The mourning of persecution will turn to singing of deliverance and redemption in the age yet to come.

The Reapers

John's eyes must have brightened with excitement as his attention turned from a voice from heaven to a white cloud and one sitting on the cloud like the son of man. Clearly this is a picture of Christ with a golden crown contrasting the false crown of Satan in chapter 13. While Satan has nothing but deception to build upon, Jesus has righteousness and justice demanding the usage of the sickle representing wrath born out of justice.

While John is beholding the appearing of Christ, an angel appears announcing the time of the harvest has come. The description of the harvest as being ripe is an indication that everything is now in place. Once again the language of Scripture reminds of God's perfect timing and His patience to wait until just the right moment in time. It is fitting to have an angel announce the time both as a warning to the earth and in keeping with Jesus' words that no one knows the time of His return except the Father. This time is announced to an angel who is none other than a messenger of God. There should not be too much made about Jesus receiving the news from an angel. The announcement is likely more for the benefit of John than it was for Christ.

In one quick movement of the sickle, the earth is reaped. The harvest is quick and certain. Jesus made this harvest. Some have suggested this is the harvest of the redeemed and the harvest of

grapes to follow is the harvest of the unredeemed. This interpretation, however, is contrary to the parable of the wheat and tares where the two are harvested together and then separated. It is more likely that this is a description of the harvest which will be further detailed in the passage to come.

Verses 17-20 are filled with potential as symbolism and the grapes of the wrath of God have become almost as a cliché. However, one should not do anything that would belittle the time as prophesied. Another angel appears rejoicing that the time has come and agreeing with God that it is time to harvest the ripe clusters from the earth. This time the harvest is completed by an angel signifying an agent carrying out the commands and will of the throne of heaven. The clusters are then thrown into a great wine press which is the wrath of God.

The wine press is described as being outside the city in verse 20. This testifies of the protection of the redeemed from the malady to follow. Further, the description says blood will come from the press which will flow to a depth of the “bridle” on a horse and a length of 200 miles. Some have taken this as a description of the battle of Armageddon and the final victory of Christ in consummating His reign. Others have seen hyperbole in John’s vision. Without having the width of this river of blood it would be impossible to calculate the volume required to produce such results. Our imaginations accurately tell us that amount of blood is beyond comprehension. There is little disagreement that this description clearly articulates the completeness of God’s wrath against sin and unbelief. The interlude is nearing completion and as we move to chapter 15 the scene shifts to a more detailed description of the wine press of God’s wrath as bowls of plagues.

Two clear themes emerge from a study of Revelation 14. First, the theme of the certainty of God’s wrath is made clear. In the middle of life here below, it is easy to get the impression that God is slow in His wrath and there is little reward to live godly. Most believers who have faithfully sought God’s way of living have at one time or another questioned the prosperity of the wicked. This passage is a strong reminder that God’s mercy is consistent and will one day give way to His wrath.

The second theme that emerges is God’s timing. Someone said, “God is never late, seldom early, and always on time”. We can be assured that God’s timing in each circumstance of our lives is perfect for our spiritual development and relationship with Christ. He will bring judgment on the wicked when the time is absolutely perfect.