

## 144,000

### Revelation 14:1–15:4

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Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who have been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come. Worship Him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.

A second angel followed and said, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries."

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on their forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name." This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.

Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."

"Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them."

I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one "like the son of man" with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth and the earth was harvested.

Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth, gather its grapes and throw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues —last, because with them God's wrath is completed. And I saw and what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

"Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, And bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you for your righteous acts have been revealed."

In the unfolding sequence of visions that John sees a message is building up. John has been shown the condition of the churches in Asia Minor at the close of the first century. Then, in a series of wonderful pictures, he sees the triumph of Jesus Christ in a most remarkable way. Then follows another picture: a scroll with seven seals is taken out of the hand of God, and Jesus Christ is the only one who is able to open the seals, unfolding the purposes of God to bring in his kingdom. As these seals are opened, seven trumpeters come onto the stage blowing their trumpets of warning that move into the second half of the book and enable us to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries that are being revealed. There are realities that lie behind what John has so far seen and heard that are bigger than has thus far been disclosed.

In a series of seven signs, John takes us behind the space-time world with which we are familiar, to catch a glimpse of another reality, one in which a war is taking place between God and the powers of darkness. Jesus is building His church within sight of the gates of hell (Matt 16:18). Beasts arise out of the earth and sea. There are powers at work in history that are seeking to destroy everything that Christ is endeavoring to build.

The beasts represent the instruments that the Satan (the Great Red Dragon) uses in order to impede the progress and ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God. The victory of God's kingdom is never in doubt. Indeed, the decisive battle has already been won at Calvary, and signaled by Christ's resurrection and ascension. And it is because of that certainty that Satan's rage is so fierce. Like a cornered animal, he bares his teeth and growls. That is, in part, the reason for the vision that follows. God's people need to be assured of their ultimate safety whenever the beast threatens to destroy.

Following the pattern outlines in our study of chapter 12, chapter 14 (and the first four verses of chapter 15) marks the end of another cycle of sevens. The pattern, as we have noted is as follows:

- (1) the conflict of the serpent with the woman and her seed (12:1-17)
- (2) persecution by the beast from the sea (13:1-10)
- (3) persecution by the beast from the land (13:11-18)
- (4) the Lamb and the 144,000 standing on Mount Zion (14:1-5)
- (5) the proclamation of the gospel and of judgment by three angels (14:6-13)
- (6) the Son of Man's harvest of the earth (14:14-20)
- (7) the saints victory over the sea beast and their victory song (15:2-4)

Four sub-sections, then, form the basic structure of 14:1-15:4 which take us to the Judgment Day once again. Each one begins with the words, "And I saw" (14:1, 6, 14, 15:1; though the NIV annoyingly renders 14:1 and 14:14 as "Then I looked" and "I looked" though the Greek is identical in each case).

### **The Lamb and the 144,000**

Chapter 14 begins with a section in which the Lamb is seen standing on Mount Zion in the presence of 144,000 (14:1-5). It is, of course, in direct contrast to the mocking parody presented in 13:11 of the beast of the earth (the false prophet, as he will later be called, 16:13; 19:20) who had lamb-like features.

The Lamb is standing on Mount Zion and this has led some to expect a literal return of Jesus to Jerusalem (Mount Zion) at some point in the future. However, a quick glance at 21:2-3 will indicate to us that Mount Zion is to descend to the new earth out of heaven in the pictorial language of the book of Revelation. That means that any identification of Mount Zion as synonymous with the earthly city of Jerusalem (during the millennial age understood as still future, for example) is a failure to appreciate the flow of thought in this book. The Jerusalem that the saints of God long for is the ideal city and it is precisely in this way that it is depicted by Paul and the author of Hebrews: "Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: 'Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband'" (Gal. 4:25-27). "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect..." (Heb. 12:22-23).

What is in view here, then, is a truth that is valid now as much as it will be during the closing days of this world's existence. In direct contrast to the number of the beast (666) that is placed on the foreheads (or right hand) of the followers of the antichrist (13:17), the followers of the Lamb have inscribed upon their foreheads the name of the Father and of the Son. As in 7:4-9, the 144,000 denotes, not ethnic Jews saved during the millennium, nor even a figurative representation of the martyrs [important as these are in Revelation], nor, as one tradition has maintained, the "innocent" babies of Bethlehem killed by Herod at the time of Christ's birth, but rather the completeness of the number of the elect. 144,000 is  $12 \times 12 \times 1000$ , or  $10 \times 10 \times 12 \times 12 \times 10$  [i.e.  $10^3 \times 12^2$ ] thus heightening the idea of completeness. The  $12^2$  is more than likely the number of the tribes multiplied by the number of the apostles, thereby representing the completion in terms of Old and New covenant saints. In "marks of indelible grace" the security of each true believer is sealed (7:4). As labels on garments identify origin and manufacturer, so the name of God on the foreheads of every believer signifies identity and safekeeping.

The 144,000 praise God by "playing harps" and singing a new song (c.f. 5:8-9; 15:2-3). The praise is a response to the victory of God, and the "new songs" of the Old Testament are always in response to victories (Pss. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa. 42:10). In this case, it is the victory over the two beasts of the previous chapter that is the cause of the celebration (though news of this must wait until 15:1-3). That the 144,000 represent the entire redeemed community of all ages accounts for the fact that their praise is so loud that it resembled "the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder" (14:3).

But who are these 144,000? A threefold description is given in verse 4:

i) they are those "not polluted by women, for they are virgins."

ii) they are those "who follow the Lamb wherever he goes"

iii) they were "purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb"

The reference to the 144,000 being the "firstfruits" might suggest that they're present a fraction of the whole that is to be redeemed, perhaps referring to the martyrs pictured in chapter 6. The offering of the "firstfruits" of the crop in the Old Testament often had the connotation of representation: the offering was in lieu of something far greater that would follow. This is how Paul uses the term in 1 Corinthians 15:20 where Christ's resurrection is seen as the firstfruits of more to come, the resurrection of believers. But we have already identified the 144,000 of chapter 7 as the whole of the redeemed. What, then, is the significance of the term "firstfruits" here? Possibly, what is in view is a contrast between the believers as "firstfruits" and the rest of mankind who will be judged (14:14-20). Sometimes, the term "firstfruits" connotes the idea of "choicest" with no thought of more to come (as in Jeremiah 2:3). The redeemed are the best offering of God.

Together, these allusions point to consecration and loyalty to Jesus Christ. The allusion to sexual purity may be derived from Israelite soldiers who were expected to maintain their ceremonial purity before battle (Deut. 23:9-10; 1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam. 11:8-11). Christians are engaged in a holy war where consecration to the bridegroom and the expectation of a wedding is part of a New Testament theme. Christians are to keep themselves pure for Christ and the consummation that awaits them in heaven. A failure to do this in Old Testament language would be deemed harlotry (Ezek. 23; Jer. 3:10). Paul could say to the Corinthians: "I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough" (2 Cor. 11:2-4). Instead of identifying with the world, Christians identify themselves with Christ. They "follow the Lamb wherever He goes." Thus, followers of the Lamb become like the Lamb; they take on the very attributes of the One they follow; they become "blameless" (14:5). Christians are sanctified by becoming Christ-like. In contrast to the beasts of chapter 13, who are liars, Christians are truthful and blameless. "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He

committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth" (1 Pet.2:21-22; c.f. Isa. 53:7).

### **The proclamation of the gospel and of judgment by three angels (14:6-13)**

Having told us of the beast of the earth and the beast of the sea, and having given a word of encouragement to the saints, we are now led into a section of warning to the unbelieving world. This fifth section is concerned with those who are not redeemed. An angel appears proclaiming "an eternal gospel." This is not a word of good news as such, but of judgment. But, it is vital to apprehend the idea that the downfall of all that is contrary to the purposes of God is, in the last analysis, good news for the believer, however painful that thought might be. The gospel always contains a dire warning of the consequences of rejecting the offer of grace in Jesus Christ. It is the twin role of the covenant that it contains curses as well as blessings. What follows is similar in nature to that recorded earlier in 8:13. Here, as there, the angel flies in mid-heaven and cries with a loud voice, and address those dwelling on earth. The unregenerate multitudes are in view, from "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people." The extent of God's sovereign rule over evil is total.

It is possible that verse 7 is to be viewed as an evangelistic appeal to those who worship the beast to instead worship God. That would make the book of Revelation a gospel tract. It would be in keeping with such passages as 2 Peter 3:9-11:

The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives.

But more than likely, the appeal of verse 7 to "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come," is meant to assert the Lord's absolute sovereignty. It would then be of the same order of thought as the closing of the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2 whenever it says that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-11).

A second angel appears declaring that Babylon (Rome and all earthly systems raised in opposition to God) is fallen (14:8; c.f. Isa. 21:9). A third angel appears also announcing judgment. This time the emphasis falls upon the eternal nature of the punishment that falls upon those who worship the beast and his image. "If

anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name" (14:9-11). The words remind us of some words of Jesus about the fire which is not quenched and the wrath which abides (Mark 9:44-45). The punishment envisioned is eternal. The expression "for ever and ever" (lit. to ages and ages), is the same expression as that used of Jesus in Revelation 4:9 where He is described as the one "who lives for ever and ever." In 2 Timothy 2:10, the words "for ever" (one word in Greek, *aionios*), is used for the eternal nature of the glory that awaits believers. If the word *aionios* means without end when applied to the future blessedness of believers, it must follow, unless clear evidence is given to the contrary, that this word also means without end when used to describe the future punishment of the lost. Similarly, the word "torment" is nowhere used of annihilation, but of conscious suffering (9:5; 11:10; 12:2; 18:7, 10, 15; 20:10).

Two verses of conclusion follow to bring this section to a close exhorting the faithful to patient endurance (as in 13:10 and 13:18). Warnings are always instruments for the godly to persevere (14:12-13). Once again, the faithful are described as those "who keep the commandments of God" and have "the testimony of Jesus" (c.f. 12:17). As before, the hope held out for believers is not a rapture from the trouble that lies ahead, but a deliverance through it to the hope that is beyond it in the new heavens and new earth of the existence to come.

Thus, the angel is heard to say, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them" (14:13). "What comfort do you derive from the article of the life everlasting?" asks question 58 of the Heidelberg Catechism, to which the answer is: "That, since I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, after this I shall possess perfect bliss, such as eye has not seen nor ear heard, neither has entered into the heart of man therein to praise God forever."

Another truth emerges here with respect to the works that believers do in this life. Though they do not contribute towards their justification, they are taken into account in the life to come. Paul teaches us that a person may build on the foundation of faith in Christ with lasting materials like gold, silver, or precious stones, so that in the consummation his or her work may survive and he may receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:10-15). There is a sense in which this life has eternal consequences in the life to come.

All of this would prove encouraging to the beleaguered Christians to whom John first wrote, but it is also a powerful incentive for us to persevere with absolute commitment in the midst of our troubles.

## **The Son of Man's harvest of the earth (14:14-20)**

The sixth section (14:14-20), describes the judgment at the end of history in much the same way as the sixth seal and sixth bowl have done previously. What had been but a warning in verses 6-13 is now described as a present reality.

The vision introduces us to "one 'like a son of man' with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand" (14:14). He is seated on a cloud and is a clear allusion to Daniel 7:13. Jesus had spoken to similar effect in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:30. His identity, Jesus Christ, has been revealed to us already in the opening chapter (1:7, 13-20). He comes as King (hence the crown) and in judgment (hence the sharp sickle).

Another angel issues a command from God to the Son of Man figure to take his sickle and reap, for the time has come. Similarly, in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Jesus' return is accompanied by "the voice of an archangel." Even in his ascended state, Jesus is subject to the Father as the Servant of the Lord and will do nothing on his own initiative (c.f. John 5:27).

The judgment is described using the metaphor of a harvest. The harvest of the earth "has become ripe" (14:15). The image is repeated and expanded in the verses that follow. The fact that these sections, 14-16 and 17-20 have small differences has led some to advocate two distinct harvests. In the first section there is the presence of the Son of Man and in the second there is the image of trampling the grapes. This may refer to the gathering of believers and the consequent judgment of unbelievers that follow. But it is equally likely that the same act of judgment is being described here by way of a parallel description of the act of judgment. One is the mirror image of the other. Just as that day will bring salvation to the 144,000, it will become eternal punishment to the rest of mankind.

Behind the imagery lies Joel 3:13, "Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow so great is their wickedness!"

The statement in verse 20 that "they were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia" needs some comment.

The spreading of blood for 1,600 stadia (42 x 10<sup>2</sup> approximately 184 miles or 300 kilometers) from the city is an approximate measurement of Palestine from the borders of Tyre to the borders of Egypt and could signal a comprehensive judgment of Palestine, but more likely, since both four and ten are numbers representing completeness (in this case, 4 becomes symbolic of the four corners



of the earth: north, south, east, west), it is a way of describing world-wide judgment.

The imagery is that of unbelievers being judged outside of the true city of God. It is, once again, a compilation of two Old Testament passages: the Joel passage already cited together with Isaiah 63:2-3, "Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? 'I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing'." The imagery will return again in chapter 19.

However gory this imagery may be, it is meant to convey the seriousness and judicial nature of the punishment that awaits unbelief. The battle/war imagery is depicted as symbolic of the enmity that will exist between the seed of the serpent and that of the woman until the end of time. But, the victory is in no doubt: it will be the Lamb's!

### **The Victory Song of the Redeemed (15:1-4)**

Just as the people of God who experienced the deliverance of God from Egyptian bondage sang a song in celebration and victory by the Red Sea (Exod. 15), so John pictures the redeemed in heaven gathered by the crystal sea, singing a new song in celebration of the Lamb's triumph over evil. We will examine this section in detail in the next chapter, but some salient points of interest are worth noting here as we bring this series of seven signs to a close.

It is a vision of the security and joy of the people of God. It signs of the triumph of Jesus Christ. It speaks of great certainty and uncertainty. Certainty to those who trust in Jesus Christ and serve him without reservation and great uncertainty of those who are outside of Jesus Christ and do not know the destiny that awaits them.

The song is majestic and triumphant. One imagines a stirring, military tune.

Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty.  
Just and true are your ways, King of the ages.  
Who will not fear you, O Lord, And bring glory to your name?  
For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you  
for your righteous acts have been revealed. (15:3-4).

And one hears in the background the echoes of another song, one which the church militant has been singing for centuries in anticipation of this new song of the church triumphant:

"I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill....and I will make the nations your inheritance, The ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; You will dash them to pieces like pottery." (Psa 2:6, 8-9).

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