

Revelation 14:1-20

Today we will get a preview of life leading up to the second coming of Christ. There will be some imagery that you appreciate and others that will make you uncomfortable. But please understand these things must be mentioned in the church so that everyone is aware at what is at stake if you follow Jesus and if you don't. It is not a chapter I enjoy preaching—instead it is a chapter I must because eternity is at stake.

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. 2 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, 3 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. 4 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, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

The identity of the 144,000

Not surprisingly we come to another difficult section in Revelation. The thrust of this section revolves around the 144,000 who have the name of the lamb and the father written on their foreheads. They are pictured on Mount Zion singing a new song, a song that no one could sing, except for them.

As we mentioned before; there has been speculation as to the identity of these saints. Some say they are Jewish Christians who became witness for Jesus after the church had been raptured; and that they play a significant role in leading Jews to Jesus. Having spoken with rabbis personally, I know that it would take exceptional witnesses for Jesus to persuade Jews to convert to Christianity, especially orthodox and conservative ones. One Rabbi in Portland told me that we will not be very successful converting Jews to Christ because Christianity has essentially "stripped" the Jewishness out of Christ. So it is quite possible these indeed are 144,000 of the best Jewish witnesses.

Others say the 144,000 is a symbol that depicts the entirety of the church. The general thought being that all Christian are protected by God and ultimately redeemed from death itself. The 144,000 then is another way of saying no one who is a Christian has been lost to sin and death. They have been protected from God's wrath.

There are many good arguments for each of these positions. There are also many bad ones. So how do folks arrive at such polar interpretations? It is based on how you view the passage. Is the description literal or symbolic? I'll let you decide your own view.

The New Song

So why were these 144,000 the only ones to sing a new song? It is because they endured great trials in their life and made it through with their faith intact. Faithful to Jesus! Faithful in character! Faithful in conduct! The text describes these 144,000 as men who did not defile themselves with women. They are also virgins. Now this opens up another can of worms! Does this mean that the most spiritual people are virgins, something the Corinthian church struggled to understand in chapter seven? Then there is the question revolving women. Aren't there any qualified females that are also numbered among the 144,000? Finally, what about married folk? Wouldn't there at least one married man who slept with his wife make the cut? Again, you could take this literally or symbolically.

Symbolically, virginity, unfaithfulness, adultery, are also terms used in Scripture to describe God's people from a spiritual standpoint! When Israel strayed from God (both men and woman) there are references to the nation being adulterers and harlots. We are also told that in relationship to Christ, the church (men and women), is to be presented as a *pure* (virgin) bride to Jesus (2 Corinthians 11:2). Again literal or symbolic I'll let you decide. Both ways have their pros and their cons.

How We Sing New Songs

But there is a great nugget of truth to be gleaned from this passage. The people who sing new songs are the ones who have overcome and have been faithful in life. A new song is symbolic of a new chapter in your life. One where rejoicing is possible because you have conquered some kind of tribulation! There will always be trials in our life. Trials are character builders. The question God wants to know is whether you will be faithful during them. In dating relationship when temptation is paramount—will you be faithful to God and your significant other? If so on your wedding night you will sing a new song! When money is tight will you still tithe and help others? When you are fired from your job! When you are looking for work? When you fill out your taxes and are tempted to lie to get a better tax break. When someone accuses you falsely! When a loved one abandons you! How will you respond?

Whenever Korban whines, I tell him lovingly. “Don’t whine! Don’t complain! Don’t make excuses and people will like you.” We both laugh after the exchange—but the principle revolves around a character issue. When things don’t go well, resolve to do the right thing no matter how tempting or difficult it is. If you are faithful, if you overcome, one day you will sing a new song!

6 Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 And he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

8 Another angel, a second, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.”

9 And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”

The Three Angels

The First: In this section we have three angels with very different messages. The first angel shares an eternal gospel and tells people to repent and worship God. What we are seeing is the last sermon to be preached and it includes the gospel. It is God’s final attempt to get people to change their hearts before the end of the world takes place. The Bible teaches that God sent his son into the world not to condemn it—but to save it (John 3:17). As we have read about the destruction of the world throughout the book of Revelation—one thing has been consistent. There is always an opportunity to repent and turn to God and His son. The sad part of it is that despite the catastrophic nature of the end times—few actually turn to God. Unfortunately, one day there will be no more opportunities. This first angel represents the last shot. The last sermon! The last gospel presentation! The last chance to be with God! There is no in-between with God. You are either on His side or you are on the others.

The Second: The second angel talks about Babylon the Great and how she has fallen. It is most likely a reference to the world systems in place which have caused the majority of people to be unfaithful to God. Babylon is a picture of a nation that was prideful and sought her own fame and fortune outside of God. She is the symbol of enticement! The second angel says one day the world system which opposes God will fall like the statue of Sadaam Hussein.

The Third: The message of the third angel is even more haunting. It promises God’s wrath on those who bow down to the beast and false prophet. The beast is best understood as a kingdom without God. The false prophet represents the false religious systems in the world that appear good on the surface, but are in fact counterfeit religion.

I’m not sure how, but my best friend and I growing up knew this passage, even though we both were not Christians. We would sit by the campfire and look at the fire and contemplate what it would feel like to be tormented in it forever and ever with no rest!

That passage made a lasting impression. It appears to be way too harsh. Some people debate whether s is to be taken literally or symbolically. Is this really what will happen to those who don't worship God the Father and his son? Would a loving God really torment people forever? If I were you I wouldn't wait to find out. The Bible says everyone will have eternal life, some in heaven—others in everlasting torment (Daniel 12:2). Without repentance there will be no new song.

The Perseverance of the Saints

12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. 13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

We cannot divorce ourselves from the reality that this book was written to first century Christians who were being persecuted. In the midst of their adversity. In the midst of their trials and tribulations! They were given by John a call to endure. They were to remain faithful, even to the point of death. Their sacrifice would be a testimony to others. Their deeds would follow them like a shadow in heaven and as a testimony on earth.

The Final Judgment

14 Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." 16 So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.

The Separation: Here we have a portrait of the Son of Man sitting on a cloud. The designation *Son of Man* is a Messianic name that goes back to Daniel. It is the most common term Jesus used to identify himself. But there is something different about him. We are familiar with the depiction of Jesus holding the lamb. With him holding children. What we are not familiar with is Jesus holding a sickle. The sickle of course is like an L-shaped sword that was used by farmers for reaping the harvest.

The sickle in the case of Jesus is symbolically used as the instrument Jesus uses to separate the wheat from the tares. The sheep from the goat, the righteous from the unrighteous. What we see here is a preview of the second coming of Christ and he is judging the world.

In the passage we just read, the righteous are being separated unto Jesus. The timing of Jesus is perfect and the harvest on the earth is fully ripe. He swings his sickle across the earth—separating every nation, tribe, and language to heaven. My friends, this is the team you will want to be on. This description of Jesus lets you know in advance what will happen to God's people. In contrast to God's team is the one that belongs to the dragon.

17 Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." 19 So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. 20 And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

The Wrath of God: This is a hard passage to comment on because I am not a fire and brimstone preacher. This is a passage that breaks my heart because I know one day this exact thing will happen. God will take vengeance on those who refused to repent and worship Him and His son as Lord.

It breaks my heart because there are some nice, moral, and caring people who I love, but want nothing to do with Jesus. Many non-Christians refuse to believe that a loving God will take that kind of vengeance. But you have to understand that He has been very patient. God's anger is depicted throughout Scripture as one that is slow and patient. But one day that anger expresses

itself like no other anger that you have seen before. One day He will completely destroy the world and judge those who would not recognize Him as Lord. And like the winepress imagery expresses it will be bloody.

In the end God wants us to give Him glory and He will settle for nothing less. He has been ignored for too long and we see here a time that He is simply tired of it. In the movie *Gladiator*, the lead character Maximus Meridius, is consumed with the reality that his family was murdered by the Caesar. There is a scene where he says one of the most memorable lines I have heard in recent times. He says.

"My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius, Commander of the Armies of the North, General of the Felix Legions, loyal servant to the true emperor, Marcus Aurelius. Father to a murdered son, husband to a murdered wife. And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next."

Maximus did get his vengeance. But it fails in comparison to the kind of vengeance that God the Father will take after all these years of being the commander of the heavenly hosts—General to the Christian legions, and the Father to a murdered Son. One day He will get His vengeance in this life and the next. If you haven't accepted Jesus, I urge you to get straight with God and change your allegiance so you can be a part of the winning army. Let's pray.