

Revelation 14:1-20

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning and a special welcome to those of you who are visiting with us. You've walked into an opening six-week series for the new year, which we have entitled 2017 Resolved, Getting a Vision of Christ.

The importance of possessing a full-orbed vision of Jesus cannot be overstated.

At the end of the day, one's view, that is one's image of Christ, will determine how you think about God, the world, and ultimately, it will impact the purposeful work that you give yourself to while here. In week one, we saw a vision of Jesus from Revelation 1. It was an exalted vision of a resurrected Christ who held the keys of death in His hands.

And in week two, we saw that that Christ had a living word for the church. Last week, we looked at Revelation chapter 5, a distinct and glorious vision of Jesus.

[1 : 29] And whereas in chapter 1, He was resurrected from the dead, in chapter 5, He had laid hold of that scroll of God with seven seals, and it was emblematic of His present reign and outpouring of His rule over the earth, all the way in and through this present day.

So today, then, I've chosen a representative chapter of the book's main body with all of its perplexities. I want to explore with you what the rule of Jesus will ultimately mean for the world. But more importantly, what that ought to do in governing the course of our life. Chapter 14 is an extraordinary chapter.

It's this wild ride of these almost inexplicable night visions. I can almost see John, the writer, as an imagined house guest.

And I'm down in the kitchen early in the morning, and I've got my coffee going, and suddenly the guest room door opens, and out comes John.

[3 : 08] And, Good morning, John. How are you? And he says, Oh, wow. If I could relay to you the dreams I had last night.

In our chapter 3, visionary-like dreams. The dream-like feel of the chapter, with all of its strangeness, and all of its symbolic nature, should not surprise us.

Literary professor Leland Ryken, concerning this kind of literature, has written, Dream, and not narrative, is the model that visionary literature in the Bible follows.

Listen to what he says. Momentary pictures, fleeting impressions, characters and scenes that play their brief part, and then drop out of sight.

Abrupt jumps from one action to another. And so, chapter 14 is very much like that. You could almost envision John falling to sleep, and having this dream-like, visionary experience.

[4 : 28] And then midnight, he rolls over, and has a second, and then eventually a third. And when you look at the picture painted in his first visionary experience, it is extraordinary.

The first one is right there in the first five verses. 14, verses 1 through 5, this is what he saw. He saw the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, with a full orchestra of stringed instruments before him, 144,000 voice choir singing praises to him, and in a processional way, it is as though they are all following him wherever he went.

Notice the symbolic nature. I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion, which is, of course, the biblical language of Jerusalem, stood the Lamb. The Lamb is symbolic for Jesus himself, the one who was slain.

And with Jesus, 144,000 who had his name, name written on their foreheads. Of course, a seal, that which is emblematic of ownership.

These belong to him. And then a roar of many waters, like the sound of loud thunder, and a voice like the sound of harpists playing on their harps.

[5 : 55] So as Tyndale so beautifully put it in his 1526 first ever English translation, harpists harping on their harps. Indeed, when you read the original construction, that's almost exactly what it is.

This beautiful, majestic, dreamlike picture is before him. And then you have 144,000 voice choirs singing a new song.

I don't know. The content of the song is not given. But we know that in chapter 4, there was a song that was celebrating God as creator. And we know that in chapter 5, there was a new song celebrating God as Savior.

And so perhaps here in chapter 14, we have a song celebrating their ultimate glorification. But how do we understand the number?

Do you understand it as a literary symbol? Or are you to understand it as a literal number? Opinions differ. I'm not here to argue. Yet I would remind us that this kind of literature is highly charged with symbolism.

[7 : 11] The text might even give us some help. Notice what it says there in verses 3 and 4. The 144,000 are those who have, quote, been redeemed from the earth.

And again in verse 4, these have been redeemed. Now that is the identical word used in chapter 5, verse 9, last week's vision.

And there, our translators put it ransomed. But it's the identical word. Worthy are you to take the scroll, chapter 5, and open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you redeemed people for God.

And who? Well, there it says, from every tribe and language and people and nation. It is possible, probable, that the 144,000 represent the fullness of God's people at the end of time.

All those who belong to the Lord. They are the redeemed. They are from all the tribes and nations and languages. Twelve times twelve in fullness. And that ten times over.

[8 : 21] What a great and glorious scene, regardless of how you take that. The rule of Christ will one day have surrounding Him at the end of time all of those who notice in verses 4 and 5 are pure.

There's no more lying coming from their mouths. It is as if it is all in a glorified state. Upon Mount Zion. All of the temple imagery. This is where the rule of Christ is moving.

To a day when we follow Him. The way a child follows a Pied Piper.

A day when we sing to Him. When we look Him in the eye. And are known. Fully known. When songs begin to emerge from the voice of the immense congregation who are the people of God. This indeed is the image that he sees in the night. Oh, for a heart to praise my God. A heart from sin set free.

[9 : 34] A heart that feels Thy blood so freely shed for me. He rolled over in the night though.

That vision dissipated from his mind. And I want to take a moment just to go to the end of the chapter and to see what corresponding vision is given in verses 14 to 20.

It's quite different. It's as foreboding as the first was fortifying. Take a look. Look. The Lamb is now one like a son of man on a white cloud.

The stringed instruments and all of the songs of his host are replaced with a sickle that sweeps and swings in wrath, cutting down all who dwell on the earth.

This is almost more like a nightmare than it is of a dream you never want to wake up from. But this too is a vision of Christ.

[11 : 00] And I'm convinced as the year gets underway, this vision also is for us. We must see it lest we develop a view of Jesus that is only soft, only inviting, only universally accepting.

The son of man here in verse 14 is a direct allusion to Daniel 7. Daniel 7 is the visionary experience of the chaotic rulers trying to overthrow God's rule.

And the Ancient of Days sets up a day of judgment and the thrones, and he gives his kingdom to one like a son of man ascending there on the clouds. So in Daniel 7, it is almost as if Jesus, in his ascension, has finally judged the evil one and has taken his rightful rule.

Here, the son of man is moving in the other direction to the earth in order to harvest all things with a sickle. Have you ever seen such an image of Jesus?

I've been told in the Orthodox tradition that there are iconic images of Jesus where his face is separated right down the front. And on one side, he looks inviting and welcoming and smiling.

[12 : 18] And on the other, as angry as a man who's ready to harvest the earth. In other words, they are capturing these two visions. Both in Jesus. Of a coming judgment.

Strings and songs are not the only thing that dance through one's mind when we consider Jesus. No, those strings and songs are wedded to the sound of a sickle.

Softly at work like a rhythm section. Keeping time. All things under his hand.

Now between these two visions of Jesus rests that middle dream in the night. That fleeting impression given to John. And this is actually the body of the chapter that I want us to draw our attention to.

If the opening verse and the closing verses are visions of the ultimate end to which the rule of Christ is going. Namely, he's joined with all of his own in celebration.

[13 : 29] And he is harvesting all of those in wrath who have rejected him. If that is a then picture, then the middle, I believe, is his until then dream.

Until then. Three angels. Three angels. And the activity assigned to them by God for all who dwell upon the earth.

What are we to make of the angels? There they are. Verse 6. Verse 8. Verse 9. Just as the lamb was symbolic for Jesus in the day of final revelation.

Just as the son of man and the sickle represented the final day of judgment. What might these three angels represent? Stay with me on this.

It's going to take a moment. I like to preach merely with passion. But there's got to be an argument made. In a nutshell, my view is this. That while John clearly sees three angels.

[14 : 35] It's a vision of three angels. The fullness of what he envisions is nothing less than the apostolic message being proclaimed throughout the earth through human messengers.

Even by you and me. Why do I think that's the case? Please. Briefly. Take the word angels.

Throughout the Bible, the term angel is also translated messenger.

It's one and the same. The angel is the messenger. The messenger is the angel. And it can refer equally in the scriptures to heavenly beings. But as well to human beings.

So in Numbers chapter 20, Moses verse 14 sent messengers. In other words, God's man sent angels to distribute or dispatch his will.

Joshua in chapter 7 does the same. In both cases, the angels are human beings sent out by God's appointed savior leader with his word for what was to take place.

[15 : 39] The term is not only then used of ordinary people, but it's used particularly of prophets. In Haggai 1.13 we read, Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, or literally, Then Haggai, the angel of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message.

The very name Malachi means, My messenger. My angel. The term is even used in Malachi to identify the later arriving prophet John the Baptist.

Chapter 3, verse 1 reads, Behold, I send my angel, and he will prepare the way before me. Jesus picks up on Malachi's prophetic discourse and attaches it to a human being, John the Baptist.

So the entire prophetic tradition, those who bring the word of God to the world in which God has made, often are the human beings.

There's so many areas in the New Testament we could look at, but it is interesting that in Revelation chapter 1, there were seven angels there, and they were representing the seven churches.

[16 : 43] You might remember. In fact, they were symbolically seven stars. Now, it's very likely that the seven angels in chapter 1 were the seven pastor-teachers of the seven churches.

Because the very image of stars in their hand, in the hand of the Son of Man, in the chapter previous to our own, verse 13, speaks of the vision that Jacob had when he saw the sun and the moon and the stars and all bowing down to him.

And you go back and chase that out, and it was his family. These were people. All of God's people were going to one day bow to the one that came from Joseph's salvation.

Angels, seen by John, in this visionary experience, could very well represent human beings sent by God to get something done for him until then.

I mean, we know that the eternal gospel which this first angel proclaims to all who dwell on the earth, to every nation, tribe, language, and people, is a task that was given to the apostles.

[18 : 01] So not only does the word itself, angels, suggest that these are human messengers sent with the gospel, the activity of these angels is the activity given to the apostles and those who follow them.

This line here is beautiful. They are sent, verse 6, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to all who dwell on the earth, every nation, language, and people.

We know that that task has been given to his own and to those that he then entrusts. So it's the very thing. This gospeling is what you find Philip doing in Acts chapter 8.

It's the same thing you find Peter and John doing. They're proclaiming the eternal gospel in Acts chapter 8, verse 25. It's what you find Paul and Barnabas doing in Acts 14, 7.

They are gospeling. It's what you find Luke and Timothy doing in Acts 16, 10. They are gospeling. And according to the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9, 14, it actually applies to all future pastors.

[19 : 12] Those who have the Lord's message. So what does John envision? Now we're ready to look at this perhaps with a fresh set of eyes.

Between these massive visions at the end, he has an until then vision of the angels who have a role to play in the world until he comes.

Look at the content of the message. The first angel, I would summarize simply, they're to tell people to fear God.

And notice, it's a message of salvation. It says, Give Him glory because the hour of His judgment has come and worship Him. The word worship, the worshipping of Him is only done in Revelation. through those who are voluntarily worshipping. So, the word that's to go out from the church in light of what we know at the end is people are to be told, Fear God.

[20 : 23] And come to faith in Christ. That's just synonymous for me. To fear God is nothing less than to have faith in Christ. It's an evangelistic call.

And notice, it won't be universally accepted. That phrase there, to all those who dwell on the earth, is used 11 times in Revelation. And it's almost exclusively used in the sense of people who continually reject the message.

The expectation of the church is to call people to faith in Christ with an awareness that not many will come. Verse 8.

That's not the only message. A second angel joins. Fallen. Fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion over sexual immorality.

If the first message is, Worship God. This message, in a sense, is to proclaim to the world, You are fallen. This is almost a fate accompli.

[21 : 35] This is judgment pronounced on the world as though it had already taken place. And notice, it's Babylon, who will come back in chapter 18.

When that actual pronouncement comes. In chapter 18, verse 2, Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great. And what is this passion of Babylon?

Chapter 18, verse 3, For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the passion over sexual immorality. The kings of the earth have committed immorality with her. And how? The merchants of the earth have grown rich from the powers of her luxurious living.

The passionate, sexual immorality of Babylon is connected to the economic prosperity of the few at the expense of what is just and right.

And the word of the church is to proclaim, Fallen! Fallen! Is all of this. Judged!

[22 : 44] And I indicate it before time when it actually occurs. the ships, the kings, the merchants, all of those who utilize the strength and power of the world for their own benefit rather than the benefit of the people in any just way.

Let me come back to it. But there's a third word, verses 9 to 11.

Another angel, And if you worship the beast in its image, then God's wrath is falling upon you and there will never be any rest for you day or night for eternity.

This eternal warning of condemnation. Those are the three words given to the church until then. Worship God. Come to faith in Christ.

One. To pronounce judgment on the earth for all of its injustice. Three. To issue a word of warning that the fullness of wrath will one day come.

[23 : 56] Now, there's some things I've noticed in the church on these three-fold calling. We all have our center of gravity.

But all three are to be proclaimed together. There's an element of Christianity in America, soft evangelicalism, that is happy to proclaim the first, first, fear God, come to faith in Christ, that you might join the harps at the end of the age.

But little do you hear of them concerning the second or the third. There's another element of the Christian proclamation in our country today that's happy to emphasize the third, wrath is coming upon all.

But rarely do you hear them proclaiming an eternal gospel of the good news. There's an element within the church in our country that would grab hold of the second and willingly, gladly proclaim all of the injustices of the earth as that is the message we are to be about today.

Yet they would and perhaps neglect the first and the third. This is the dilemma of what it is to be a Christian in our world today.

[25 : 38] And this really comes down to what God has called you to do. You and I are called to embrace all three. the challenge of this vision goes to the church to embrace salvation comes through faith in Christ.

Second, that all the injustices which we see in the world need to be fought against and proclaimed to be against the will of God and judgment will come.

Third, to indicate that God is not universally accepting not just all arm embracing that he will judge those who don't want to live under the word of Christ.

You can see exactly where this goes. Evangelical conservatism will do number one and number three. Liberal Protestantism will do number one but want to steer away from number three.

Evangelical activism will embody number two but not really want to get mixed up in number one or number three. And all of us have our own center of gravity and the scriptures are this is the word, this is the fullness of the gospel that you have to proclaim.

[27 : 06] And let me tell you what's going to happen as a result. You're going to impale yourself everywhere you go. on the very message and life that you lead.

Let me say a word. The American promise of justice for all is a dream.
but John's dream gives me God's eternal promise.

Think of it. The actions of the nations in an effort to approximate justice always get it wrong.

Truncate it. Reduce it. Miss it. Apply it in a wrong way. And on what basis?

[28 : 21] More often than not, economic viability. You have to just ask yourself, how is it that those who are unable to enter our country today are also not allies in what it requires for our economic stability and progress?

countries and how is it that countries that are places where evil is known to come from and destroy are free yet to enter because they're economic allies?

This is a simple minor example of the inability of anyone in the world to execute justice and the church is called to say fallen.

Fallen is Babylon. Fallen are the kings and the merchants and the men on the ships who would rape the world and its people for their own welfare.

Fallen. Now there will be some that will say we need a little more of that. Actually you need all three and you need all three in spades.

[30 : 11] We need Christians from Holy Trinity that are ready to stand and say hey fear God I need to talk to you about having faith in Christ. I need to let you know that you can be a child of God that your sins can be forgiven that you need to worship him you need to worship him because he made you you need to worship him because in Christ he saved you you need to worship him because in the end he's going to glorify you.

you have got to give your life to Jesus. We need that and we need more of it. But we also need the third. Hey not everybody is going to be good with God at the end.

I'm tired of a soft Christianity that is all inclusively embracing on the final day. Universalism is what it is. When the picture of the scriptures actually proclaims a sickle and the most loving thing I can do at times is to say the wrath of God is coming through the same man that you claim is the love of God.

He holds both in his hands. Look at his face. He's bigger than you proclaim. The application for us along the way, well there it is in 12 and 13.

Here's a call. Here's a call for the endurance of the saints. John must have now by now had his first cup of coffee in my kitchen and he could say well all I can make of my dream is this.

[31 : 56] Man we've got to have to press on. We've got to keep the commandments of God and my faith in Christ. There's a call to endure.

Let me put it this way. nowhere in the book of Revelation nowhere in the scriptures have I been able to find a word that will call you to leave your post where you are.

He may take you from where you are but I haven't found it. You don't leave your post in the sense of what you really hold the fullness of the message of these three. And nowhere are we taught to expect a reprieve from the onslaught.

You're going to get hit from the left and the right if you're following Christ. I mean that politically. I mean that ecclesially. But it's to endure.

It's to endure and embrace the full weight of the threefold aspect of that gospel message, that eternal gospel. To willingly understand that the hour has come where you're just going to be impaled for the fullness of the message.

[33 : 04] And not only a call for endurance, there's a word of comfort. Verse 13, another voice, 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. You're not done because you're still in the land of the living. Now you will be blessed and the Spirit says blessed. That is you will be approved by God. Approved by God.

But you are called now to remain faithful to His Word and to be laboring in the field before the sickle falls. Calling spades a spade and rescuing people from eternal damnation and working for justice.

And in a large sense, feeling alone most of the time. Misunderstood all of the time.

Marginalized, who cares for an increasing amount of the time. Blessed are those who die in the Lord, who rest from their labors.

[34 : 19] As this year gets underway, I want all of these visions of Jesus falling upon the church. I want you to see Him resurrected from the dead, giving you comfort over death.

I want you to see Him exercising the will of God even in this chaotic world. I want you to be pressing on knowing that there is a day when you will surround Him in song.

And yet, yes, I embrace He is coming with sickle, but I want you laboring, calling the world. In every field you are in, fear God. Fallen is Babylon.

The fullness of wrath is coming. Grab it all and give it to the world. A three-legged stool can be trusted.

Get off your unicycle or your bicycle. Get back on Revelation 14 tricycle and get something done before you look them in the eye.

[35 : 26] well, I look forward to the day when I rest from my labors. I'm sure you do. But until then, come what may, Holy Trinity Church will just continue to labor for our rest.

There are a lot of saints up there who played it out well and call us to do the same. our Heavenly Father, we give ourselves to you again.

Knowing the perplexities of our own temperament, our own personality, our own proclivities, knowing where we feel a center of gravity, I pray that you would, by the strength of this word, call us to life until then.

awake us from our slumber, all of us, that we might embrace the fullness of this eternal gospel and fling us like angels in flight all over the earth, dispensing your word.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Ž