

The Great Harvest

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[0 : 0 0] 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. 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 spring of water.

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

And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, If anyone worships a beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 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 body of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

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.

[1 : 5 6] 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.

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.

So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped. Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle.

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.

For the angel swung his sickle across the earth, and gathered the great harvest of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse brittle for 1600 stadia.

[3 : 1 7] Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last for with them the wrath of God is finished.

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingle with fire, and also those who had conquered the beast and its image, and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass, with sharps of God in their hand.

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the son of the Lamb, saying, Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty.

Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations, who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name. For you alone are holy.

All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. Now God's purpose for us as we look at this passage this morning is there in chapter 14, verse 12.

[4 : 29] If you look at it, here is a call for the endurance of the saints. It's a repeat of what we saw last week in 1310. Here is a call for endurance and faith of the saints.

And it's an idea which is also echoed at the end of our passage, in chapter 15, verse 2, where those who belong to Jesus are described as those who have conquered.

It's a picture of courageous perseverance. So that's the issue, really, of this passage. It's all about endurance, courageous perseverance, those of us who are followers of Jesus.

Now if you've been following this series of talks, then you'll remember that Revelation 12, chapter 12, verse 1, through to 15, 4, forms a section within the book which is all about the spiritual battle.

They're chapters which help us to persevere as followers of Jesus by enabling us to understand history. Not simply history on a sort of horizontal level, the kind of thing we read about in the media or study at school, but actually the vertical level of history from God's perspective.

[5 : 44] The chapters describe what we might call the church age. That is, the period of time from the resurrection and ascension of Jesus until he returns at the end of time.

We saw in chapter 12 that Satan has been defeated through the death of Jesus on the cross and that his resurrection and ascension proclaim that he is now Lord.

In response, Satan is furious and makes war on the church. In chapter 13, he does so through political oppression and false religion.

And yes, there will be a day when Satan is finally destroyed at the end of history. But until then, those who belong to Jesus are in a war zone, a spiritual war zone.

Now, forgive what may be a familiar illustration, but I think it does illustrate this point very well. Just think of the closing months of the Second World War. In June 1944, the Normandy landings witnessed D-Day as huge numbers of soldiers and military equipment landed on the beaches of Normandy in northern France.

[6 : 57] At the same time, British forces advanced up through Italy and Russian forces advanced from the east. Now, at that point, you could have said the war is won in terms of resources, the number of soldiers, military equipment, money, the war was over.

And yet, there followed 11 months of bitter fighting, setbacks, and large numbers of casualties and amongst some of the most bloody battles of the war.

Finally, in May 1945, came VE Day and the defeat of Nazi Germany. Now, what would those soldiers, just think for a moment, what would those soldiers who landed in Normandy needed to have heard?

The war's been won. Keep going. Now is the time not to give up, but for endurance, for perseverance.

The end is in sight. And that's just what today's passage does for those of us who belong to Jesus. They show us the end is in sight.

[8 : 10] They show us the reality of judgment so that we understand and persevere as his people until he returns. Now, the structure of the passage is fairly straightforward.

There's a series of six angels that we're introduced to. Each one has a message. They're in two groups of three and we're going to look at each of those two groups of three in turn.

If you've got a copy of the outline, you'll see that. Firstly, the announcement of judgment, chapter 14, verses 6 to 13. Here's the first angel, verses 6 and 7.

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. 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.

It shows what's happening in the midst of the spiritual battle throughout the church age, in the midst of the events we've been thinking about the last two Sundays. at the same time as all those things, at the same time that Christians face political oppression and false religion, the master of Jesus is going out to the nations.

[9 : 36] God's eternal, unchanging gospel to every tribe, nation, language, and people. A call to repent, a warning of the judgment to come, which, as the Lord Jesus himself said, could be at any time.

And then the second angel, verse 8, another angel, a second, followed, saying, Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.

Now we're going to think much more about the significance of Babylon and the nature of Babylon in chapters 17 and 18.

In brief, it represents human society and civilization in rebellion against God. And as we said last week, sexual immorality is so often in the Bible a picture of going after other gods.

So then here is an announcement of judgment on those who don't belong to Jesus. And then the third angel, verse 9, And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, If anyone worships the beast in its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 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 : 09] And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest day or night, these worshippers of the beast and his image and whoever receives the mark of its name.

Here then is the final judgment itself, overseen by God and in the presence of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus. Notice the repetition, will you, of worship language in verse 9 from verse 7.

In other words, we're being presented, aren't we, with a choice. You can either worship the one true living God, but if you're not that kind of worshipper, then notice there's only one alternative.

You're worshipping the beast, Satan himself. A secular society like ours is ironically full of worshippers, things we go to, things we trust, things we look to, to find significance and meaning and fulfillment and security.

Maybe you'll hear this morning, actually, you wouldn't regard yourself as a Christian, but nor do you really think of yourself as being anti-Christian. You regard yourself as being spiritually neutral.

[12 : 34] And yet, here, as elsewhere in the Bible, there's never any neutrality. If you don't belong to Jesus, there's only one alternative.

Notice, really, the language of judgment in verse 10 echoes the rest of the Bible. So the language of fire and sulfur describe God's judgment in just the same way that the Old Testament cities of Sodom and Gomorrah experienced it.

And the language of drinking the wine of God's wrath poured out into the cup of his anger is frequently used in the Old Testament. The description is of judgment being endless, conscious, and irreversible.

Now, you may know that some people have suggested that actually judgment won't be like that, that actually people will simply be destroyed, wiped out, annihilated.

And yet, it's very clear, I think, from these verses that judgment is going to be eternal and ongoing. The word torment in verses 10 and 11 in Revelation always speaks of ongoing conscious suffering.

[13 : 51] And in verse 11, it goes up forever and ever. I take it the Apostle John is simply reflecting the words of the Lord Jesus himself.

In Matthew chapter 25, he says, those who don't belong to him will go to eternal punishment. Those who do belong to him will have eternal life.

In other words, we mustn't water down the horrific imagery and pictures we have here in verses 10 and 11. I think sometimes we can do that.

Perhaps we talk about hell as eternal separation from God. and yet Jesus never talked about something so terrible in such sanitized terms.

Neither do other New Testament writers. Yes, what's being described here is picture language. And yet it is to convey a reality.

[14 : 57] And surely the reality is just as terrible as the picture language. language. Maybe the medieval artists and sculptures with their tortured and agonizing depictions of hell actually appreciated the horror of judgment far more than we do.

you. So then what is the application of this first point? Well I guess we might expect John to say something like this. Listen to the message of the angels.

If you haven't put your trust in Jesus you should do. And it's true. You should do that if you haven't done so and I'd love to talk to you afterwards about how you can do that if you haven't done so.

But as we saw earlier John's application is primarily for those who do belong to Jesus. Verse 12 again.

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints. So you say how does this work? Well the fact is you and I can endure all sorts of things can't we?

[16 : 07] if we know there's an end. If we know it's not going to go on forever. So at school you can endure the stress of exam season because you know there's going to be an end point.

You're not just going to have endless exams. Or if you're a runner, well if you're not a very good runner perhaps you should say like me, then what is it that keeps you going to the end?

Well it's the fact that you know there's going to be an end. It's not just going to go on forever. Or if you're a mother and you've given birth, what enabled you to endure the agony of labor?

It was surely knowing there would be an end. It's not going to go on forever. Have you ever thought what it would be like to live in Nigeria's middle belt as a follower of Jesus, facing regular attacks by Islamic militants?

will we be safe in church this Sunday? Not COVID safe, but properly safe in church on Sunday.

[17 : 19] Perhaps waiting for the next attack on your village, perhaps waiting to be asked at gunpoint whether you're a Christian, and knowing the enormous implications to the way you're going to answer that question.

It's often said that those who see the invisible can do the impossible. And God wants his people to see that the end is in sight.

Keeping going, following Jesus, may be very costly. And yet, verse 13 contains the most wonderful promise. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them. Yes, there's no guarantee of security in this world, but there are wonderful promises for the next.

Christ. Now, what I'd like to do is to set some homework for next week. I don't know if you thought you'd be sent away with some homework as you came to Grace Church this morning.

[18 : 29] But this week, I would like to set some homework. Don't worry, it's not going to become a trend, it's not going to happen every week. But I would like to set some homework for this week. Because remember the book of Revelation is written to the seven churches, which we see at the beginning of the book in chapters 2 and three, the seven churches in what is now Turkey, written to encourage them to persevere in the midst of the battle.

And there are broadly four areas in which they needed to endure, and they're just the areas that we need to endure in as well. I've put those four areas for us on the outline.

So notice there's the drip, drip of false teaching and false religion. There's the temptation to sexual immorality, in other words to follow the world just because everyone else is doing so.

There's hostility and persecution and anti-Christian propaganda. And fourthly, there's the temptation simply to doze off and fall asleep, not during sermons, but just generally to doze off and fall asleep as Christians in the Christian life.

and what I'd like us to do for our homework is to read through those two chapters, chapters two and three, and then to carefully consider where you might face those temptations and how the fact that judgment is coming and the end is in sight encourages you to be faithful to Jesus.

[20 : 04] is that something you do this week, perhaps this evening, or perhaps one evening during the week? To consider where you're finding the spiritual battle hardest at the moment.

It may be that you're the only Christian in your class at school or in your family. It might be the battle against sexual temptation and the pressure of living in an anti-Christian world, the pressure to be just like everyone else.

it might be the battle against lukewarmness and half-heartedness. Or it may simply be that you're in danger of dozing off, spiritually speaking.

For some, the homework should be a real encouragement as we set our eyes on the end, on the judgment.

For others, it will be a warning. hopefully leading to repentance. So the announcement of judgment.

[21 : 09] Secondly, the execution of judgment. Chapter 14, verse 14 to 15, 4. Now before we get to the next three angels, there's a change of camera angle.

Have a look at verse 14. Then I looked and behold a white cloud, and ceased on the cloud, one like a son of man with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand.

So suddenly the camera angle changes and the focus is on the son of man, the one who in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament is given all authority over all people for all time.

No wonder in the Gospels is Jesus' favourite title, most often used title, for himself. And here we see it's Jesus who executes the final judgment.

As verse 15, the next angel comes and calls with a loud voice to the Son of Man, put in your sickle and reap. And in verse 16, he then does say, I wonder if you remember the parable of the weeds that the Lord Jesus told.

[22 : 20] how a farmer sows some good seeds, some wheat in his fields. But while he's sleeping, his enemy comes along and sows weeds.

A few weeks later, one of the farm labourers notices. He goes to the farmer, he explains the situation. He says to the farmer, would you like me to pull up all the weeds? And the farmer says, no, because in pulling up the weeds, you'll ruin the crop because you'll pull up the crop as well.

No, he says, wait, wait till the harvest. And harvest everything. Harvest the crop and then burn the weeds.

And Jesus says by way of explanation in Matthew chapter 13 verses 41 and 42, just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so it will be at the end of the age.

The Son of Man will send his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers. And throw them into the fiery furnace. And that is just what happens here in verses 14 to 20, as the risen victorious Jesus with his angels executes the final judgment.

[23 : 36] Notice, will you, in verses 15 and 16, if you have a look at them, there's no mention of judgment, simply of reaping and harvesting. Whereas in verses 17 to 20, there's the most graphic picture of judgment, as those who have not worshipped God are thrown into the great winepress of his wrath.

In other words, this picture of harvest seems to be describing both the gathering of those who do belong to Jesus, in verses 15 and 16, and then followed in verses 17 to 20, by judgment on those who don't.

harvest. And it is a terrifying picture, verse 20. The winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1600 stadia.

Now, as so often in Revelation, events are described not only using pictures, but also using numbers. 1,600 stadia is the equivalent of 184 miles.

But rather than describing a literal river of blood, it might be best to understand it in terms of being a number that denotes that now God's worldwide judgment has been completed.

[25 : 00] I think we're being invited to do the maths. So the numbers 4 and 10 in Hebrew are numbers of completion. For the mathematically minded, 4 times 4 times 10 times 10 is 1600.

The point being, judgment is complete. But perhaps you're thinking to yourself, surely this is unspeakably, unspeakably harsh.

Well, just remember with you how our passage began. The message of the first angel. The nations have been warned and those who are now cast into the wine press of God's wrath are those who have refused to heed the warning.

If God is God, then it is a terrible and foolish thing to refuse to worship and glorify him. To refuse to repent.

It is a truly wicked thing to worship the beast instead of the lamb. God patiently warns, but if we won't heed the warning, there is nowhere else to go.

[26 : 22] God will be so. So let's make sure we're clear about the reality of judgment. We live in a culture, don't we, which likes to decide for itself what God is like.

You know, I like to believe God is, dot, dot, dot. How can you believe in a God who is, dot, dot, dot. And I think it's very easy as Christians to do something similar.

In fact, I can see the seeds of that temptation in my own heart. heart. And no more so than with a passage like this, which describes the reality of judgment using such terrible language.

And yet, of course, God is an objective reality, judgment is real. And therefore, to the extent that we struggle with the description of judgment in this chapter, rather than asking questions about God, we really need to ask questions of our own heart.

have I not grasped the seriousness of sin? What a terrible thing it is to live in God's world, the world that he's made, and yet to worship anything other than the Creator.

[27 : 34] And how truly awful it would be to live in a world where there won't be final judgments. You see, I wonder whether that's one of the reasons why we find judgments so difficult.

It's because most of us live such secure and comfortable lives. But look at our world, and our world is crying out for judgment.

It's crying out for everything to be put right in the end. And it's not just being clear about judgment, we're also invited to rejoice in it.

because we're invited to join in the rejoicing in heaven, chapter 15, verses 2 to 4. verse 3. And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its names, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty, just and true are your ways, O King of the nations.

[28 : 49] Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.

Ten days ago, Derek Chauvin, the American police officer found guilty of the murder of George Floyd, was sentenced to 22 years in prison for second degree murder.

When the sentence was announced, outside the courtroom, there were crowds and they were jubilant. They were rejoicing. Justice had been done.

Or just think of the rejoicing when some despotic regime collapses. Think of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Or the rejoicing when an election result is announced and a corrupt government is swept away.

Well, here is rejoicing like the world has never seen. As those who belong to Jesus in heaven, they sing the song of Moses. It's a song from God's Old Testament playlist.

[29 : 57] First sung after God's people had been rescued from slavery in Egypt. They'd sacrificed the lamb, each family. They'd painted the blood of the lamb around their front doors. When God that evening, that night, came in judgment, he passed over them.

He led them out of Egypt. The Red Sea was parted so they could walk to safety and then closed in again once they were through covering and destroying Pharaoh's army.

It was a song of victory, rejoicing in rescue and rejoicing in the defeat of the enemy. Yes, of course, we weep over friends and relatives who we fear will not be there in heaven to join the celebration.

But I take it there should be an equal measure of thanks and joy in God's great goodness, knowing that justice will triumph.

After all, that's what they're singing, isn't it, in verse three? Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations. Because the fact is, there are plenty of times, aren't there, when it looks as if God is simply turning a blind eye to the wickedness that is in our world.

[31 : 15] It seems he does nothing to stop the beast so often. Times when those who belong to Jesus, far from looking as if they're on the winning side, look very much as if they are on the losing side.

But one day, Jesus will return. Judgment will come. He will do what is right. And those who are with him in the new creation will rejoice.

Rejoice. It's just what we need to grasp and see if we belong to him, and to be convinced of such that we endure and persevere courageously until he returns.

Let me lead us in prayer. Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed that you are Lord of all. We thank you that on this great final day, everyone will see that as you act in justice, as your truth prevails.

[32 : 37] And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you help us not only to be clear on these things, but to be persuaded of them, and to rejoice as we look forward to that day, and in the meantime, therefore, to endure and to persevere courageously in seeking to follow the Lord Jesus.

And we ask it in his name. Amen.