

# An Eternal Gospel: A Song to Sing

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 22 January 2017

Preacher: Canon David Short

[ 0 : 00 ] Revelation chapter 14, page 1036. I don't blame Susan for going straight to 15, frankly. Page 1036. Fake news, one of the fastest growing phenomena in, well, in the world really today.

These are stories posted on the internet, sometimes just for a laugh and sometimes as entertainment. And the point about them is that they don't have any truth in them. And then they're picked up by other websites and they take on a life of their own. So in 2016, CNN, Facebook and the Weather Channel all reported there'd been a bad storm in New York, the Weather Channel, and the New York Stock Exchange was under three feet of water. That was completely false. But millions of people believed it. The Pope was supposed to endorse one of the presidential candidates during the presidential race. And it was quickly picked up by over a million media websites. I won't tell you which candidate. Fake news, it's a perfect pastime for those of us who are more, who favour entertainment rather than truth.

[ 1 : 18 ] Because we're becoming increasingly unused to truth. I think it's such a privilege for us to come week by week and open God's word together, particularly this book of Revelation.

We don't just hear the truth, but we're taken up into heaven to see things from God's point of view, things we couldn't possibly imagine, things to do with God and our world and things to do with ourselves and every living human being.

But every time we're taken up into heaven, and every time the book of Revelation does this, it is somewhat disorienting and disturbing because we're not used to so much truth all at once.

And the truth that we hear is both glorious and today devastating. This passage, 14.1 to 15.4, is perhaps the darkest portion in Revelation and maybe in all of scriptures.

Because it's the most detailed description of what the judgment of God means for those who refuse to acknowledge Christ.

[ 2 : 31 ] And as we look at it today and we listen with the ears of our heart, we need to be careful not to believe less than what God says or more than what God says.

Otherwise, we'll avoid what God says and we'll create a fake God who can neither save us nor satisfy us. So let me make two comments before we dive into the details.

Just a reminder, firstly, of symbols. Revelation is more like a painting than a photograph. God reveals himself in a series of symbols and pictures. So as we read this book, it's not like reading the history in 1 Samuel or even a gospel.

It communicates through these pictures and metaphors and symbols, most of which come from the Old Testament. So we need to be careful not to be too literalistic. So 144,000 is not a literal number. It's a symbol for the complete people of God. At the same time as I say that, I have to say that what the symbol communicates is true. In fact, the reality is more true than the symbol.

[ 3 : 42 ] So you see, the symbol of God's people with him on Mount Zion points to a bigger reality, just as being tormented with fire and sulfur does as well.

The happy reality of being on the Mount with the Lamb is greater, just as the dreadfulness of judgment exceeds the symbol. I'll come back to this in a minute.

Symbol. The second thing by way of introduction is just the shape of the passage. The passage is shaped so that it will call forth more joy than fear.

The focus is more on salvation than on judgment. If you just cast your eyes down, you will see there are four scenes in our passage today. Each of them start, then I looked or then I saw.

And this version of the Bible has very helpfully put headings at the top of them. The first and the last scene, one and four, are happy, joyful pictures of security and salvation of the people of God being face to face before the Lamb.

[ 4 : 48 ] The middle two, two and three, are about the judgment of God. And we will look at the details of them. But this, I just want to point this out. Right in the middle of the passage, between visions two and three, right in the middle is this wonderful word of encouragement, verse 12 of chapter 4.

Here is a call for endurance for the saints, for keeping his commandments, and for faith in Jesus Christ. He's just gone through the most devastating details of judgment.

And whatever else this passage says, God means this passage to help those who are finding it hard to endure. For those who are finding it difficult to obey his commands and to trust Jesus. And I have to confess to you, that's not the first thing I would have thought of to give to someone who feels discouraged or distracted. I don't think I would draw them to God's judgment, but that probably just shows how far away from God's thinking I am.

And then the encouragement in verse 13 continues, I heard a voice from heaven saying, write this, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

[ 6 : 07 ] So whatever else the passage says, I think what we're meant to take away from the passage is that if you belong to Jesus Christ, we are the luckiest, most fortunate people in all the world.

Not because we've had a good life or because we have the most toys or because we live in Vancouver, but it's because we belong to the Lord and we die in the Lord.

There's nothing, there's no power that can take that away from us. We are truly blessed if we die in the Lord because of what comes after. And it doesn't matter whether you die a hero's death in a flame of glory, or you die in an auto accident.

It doesn't matter if you die at the height of your powers or experiencing the slow decline of your faculties. We are blessed. So let's look at the four visions together.

Number one and four are about singing, and then two and three are about judgment. The first one I've called the new song, and this is the first six verses. And the first thing that hits you here is the noise.

[ 7 : 11 ] Verses one and two and three, there is this vast happy sound. Verse two, it's like Niagara Falls, loud thunder. Harpists harping on their harps, it says in Greek.

Not the elite, but the 144,000. You remember a symbol of all those people of God who belong to the Lamb on Mount Zion, and they sing a new song.

The word is a fresh, life-giving song, not just a recent song. Their new song is just, it's not just the relief of having made it through judgment, but they're in the presence of the Lamb, and we sing and we see the Lamb.

And then real care is given to describing who they are, because only those who follow the Lamb can sing this song. And John sees three things about these people.

The first is that they're redeemed from the earth. So that the true nature of all Christians is that we have been purchased. That's what the word means. We've been bought.

[ 8 : 14 ] There's a price that's been paid for us. All of those who stand on Mount Zion are redeemed from judgment. I think that's very helpful just before we look at the reality of judgment.

It's a reminder to us that none of us escape judgment because we're any morally better than anyone else, or more spiritually perceptive, or more likely to respond to God.

It's simply we've been bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. He owns us. He saved us. He preserves us. We are kept by him for him. We are redeemed. And then in verse 4, we get this symbolic description, which some people don't find helpful.

It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. And I just want to say, this has got nothing to do with sexual behavior. It's got nothing to do with singleness or marriage.

The Bible never anywhere gives a hint that sex is a dirty thing. This is the Old Testament picture language of our relationship with God. You remember? God pictures himself as a lover, and he makes a covenant of marriage with us, and we enter into spiritual intimacy with him.

[ 9 : 30 ] And God doesn't want a one-night stand. He wants those who have ongoing mutual love and affection with him. That's what this is talking about. The people on Mount Zion with the Lamb are those for whom God is the love of their lives.

Those who are spiritually faithful, who don't commit adultery with other gods, who don't have other things in their life more important than him. Or put it another way, it's those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

Because redemption isn't just static. It's an active, ongoing thing. And where did the Lamb go? Well, he came from heaven to earth to serve. He went through the cross, through the grave, and is seated to reign at the right hand of the Father.

And just so, all those who are singing on this song, we serve, we pass through death, we reign with him. And thirdly, he calls us, I think this is in verse 4, the first fruits for God and the Lamb.

This is the first part of the harvest. And in the Old Testament, it tells you the harvest is about to come. And you take the first part, not knowing really how big the harvest is going to be, and you offer it to God as a kind of a sacrifice.

[10:48] And if you ask, what sort of sacrifice in the people of God is he looking for? No lie is found, for they are blameless. Suddenly, he's not introducing moral superiority suddenly.

No lie means that we keep the testimony of God, and blameless means we've washed ourselves in the blood of the Lamb. So that's the new song.

And now I want to move into the two visions about judgment. And the first is a warning, and the second speaks of the certainty of judgment. So verses 7 to 11, 6 to 11 really, the warning of judgment.

And it takes three angels to give us this warning of judgment to explain something of the terrible reality of hell. And I think it shows something of the kindness of God and how highly he values us, that he would explain this to us beforehand.

And he warns and calls the whole world into repentance. That's the point of the first angel, verses 6 and 7. He says, God's judgment is going to be universal, not just for those who believe in it, but for every living being who literally sits on the earth.

[12:06] And before there are any details of judgment, verse 7, he cries out with an eternal gospel, fear God, give him glory, the hour of his judgment has come, worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.

So even while judgment is at the door, this first angel announces the eternal gospel, fear God, give him glory, worship him for two reasons.

Firstly, because he is the creator, and secondly, because he is judge. And this is the eternal gospel, because it goes back before time to creation and forward into the future beyond judgment.

And those two things come together in the gospel. My experience is that most of those who are strong on creation are not very strong on judgment.

And most of those who are strong on judgment are not very strong on creation. But they belong together. If God is the God who created all things, including you and me, then he owns it.

[13:10] And the good God will one day clear his creation of all evil, and that must entail judgment. Incidentally, that's why judgment is a part of the Christian gospel, because the gospel is about saving people who are sinful.

In our new neighborhood, there is a temple that I walked past yesterday. And on the wall of the temple, it says, practice no evil, do good, purify your mind.

This is what Buddha taught. That's all very good. What if you can't do it? And the testimony of scripture, and the testimony of our hearts, I think if you just are honest for a moment, is we don't love our neighbors as ourselves.

We don't love God as he ought to be loved. But the good news of the Bible is that God reigns, and he will deal with evil, and he's made a way of dealing with evil, and destroying evil without destroying us, which is why salvation and judgment are two sides of the one coin.

Then the second angel, in verse 8, announces that Babylon is fallen. The angel describes Babylon's work, and Babylon is, this is the first time she's been introduced into Revelation.

[14:30] She is a prostitute, and she is a symbol for all that seduces the people of God away from God. And she tries to make the nations drink the wine of the fury of her sexual immorality.

Again, corrupting influence. But it's left to the third angel in verses 9 to 11 to give us the most details of the experience of judgment.

And if Babylon makes the nations drink the wine of her fury, God also makes the nations, or he makes Babylon, to drink the fury of his wrath.

And what does it mean? Well, in verse 10, I pick up halfway through, and I say these words again.

They will be tormented with fire and sulfur, in the presence of his holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb.

The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image. Let me make four comments for you.

[15:41] Firstly, the suffering described here is symbolic but real. Fire and sulfur are pictures. But I quote to Jim Packer.

He says, the reality exceeds the symbol in dreadfulness. He says, it's meant to appall us and strike us dumb with horror, assuring us that if heaven will be better than we could dream, so hell will be worse than we can conceive.

So the suffering, while symbolic, is real. Secondly, did you notice the suffering is personal? It's between Christ and the person who rejects him.

Verse 10 tells us that the torment comes from being in the presence of Christ. Sometimes in the Bible, hell is understood and talked about in terms of being cast away from God's presence.

But here, suffering comes from being in the presence of the Lamb of Christ. What that means is this. It does not mean that Christ is a nasty and cruel king who enjoys inflicting suffering on his conquered enemies.

[16:52] You know, like a king who brings out his enemies each night, makes them dance on hot coals for his amusement. What it means is this. It is that rejecting or dismissing or hating Christ in this life will continue into the next life.

And even those who belong to Babylon, even when they pass through the day of judgment and they see that he is king of kings and lord of lords, they will bow the knee, but they will not do it happily or willingly.

And the glory of Christ that they will see and they will know the fact that he is good and just will not produce repentance, but it will produce an ever deepening resentment for eternity in his presence. It has to be this way. If you deny or refuse or reject the glory of Christ, it doesn't make any dent on the glory of Christ, but the way we deny his glory here will be the way that we continue to deny it there.

Thirdly, I can't see any way around this, but the suffering seems to go on forever. It's become very popular for evangelical Christians to understand God's punishment these days in terms of annihilation.

[18:15] It's called conditional immortality. So depending on the evil that you've committed in this life, you suffer for a determined period, then you just cease to exist.

And there are people who I enormously admire who hold this view. And it's very attractive. I just, I just, I don't think you can square this text with it.

Apart from the fact that the smoke goes up forever and ever, there is no rest for these folk day and night. And each time in Revelation, this phrase is used.

It's speaking of something that continues. I think our fundamental problem here is basically with God. We just, we just don't believe what he says.

And it's partly because we're so focused on this life that all our fears are temporary fears. We fear cancer. We fear disease. We fear plague. We fear poverty.

[19:12] We fear the war. We fear abuse, but not hell. And the fourth and final thing I want to say is that judgment and wrath are not natural for God.

A judgment is an essential part of the gospel, but it is not an essential part of God. Because the wrath of God is only ever called forward from him in the face of evil.

The wrath of God and the judgment of God are just the holiness of God in the face of evil, responding to sin. So in the Old Testament, in the book of Isaiah, God calls his judgment, his alien work.

It's not a natural part of who God is. He's responding to evil. And we get a small sense of this. I think we sometimes taste a little bit of this.

When we witness something that's just unspeakable happening to someone that we love, and the unfairness and the injustice of it rises up in us.

[20:17] And it's not right that that thing be swept under the carpet or covered over. And on the day of judgment, the Bible teaches everything will be exposed, every good, every evil, and God will not, he will not sweep anything under the carpet.

And there will be a reward for both good and evil. But the point of this second vision is that it's a warning. You must choose.

You must place your faith in Jesus Christ. You must worship him. As I say, it's a great kindness of God to warn us about this before. He doesn't have to warn us.

But he warns, and he warns, and he calls, and he calls, and again he calls us this morning on top of the death of his son. And the reason he warns us is because of how much he loves us, and values us, and wants us.

And he delays his judgment so that we will repent. And if you are not sure you belong to Christ, you must speak to someone, speak to me, speak to someone, speak to God better still, and ask him to enter in and give you that assurance.

[ 21 : 29 ] Because judgment will come. And that is the point of the third vision. More quickly now. The third vision is verses 14 to 20. And it's the vision of the harvest.

And it assures us in verse 15 that there is an hour of judgment coming. That there is a time appointed by God when he will judge the world. That things will not go on and on and on just like they are now.

That God is watching for a moment when the harvest is ripe. And that means when the last of his people enter in. And the image of the harvest is very clear.

It will bring joy for some and horror for others. And the horror is described in verses 19 and 20. The angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the winepress, 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's bridle for 1600 stadia. Again, picture language, but it's meant to scandalize us.

[ 22 : 35 ] Human blood is human life. And we think that we are more compassionate with God, but God is the one who teaches us how precious human life is.

And we ask, how can he remove this life that he gave us? How can he place people under judgment? You sometimes hear people say that the God of the Old Testament is a bit cranky and nasty and all about judgment.

The God of the New Testament, much nicer God, gracious, you know, brotherhood. The opposite is true. In the Old Testament, well, it's not quite the opposite. In the Old Testament, God reveals himself as merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love.

And you know, I've said this before, the one person who spoke more than anyone else in all the Bible about the reality of judgment is Jesus himself. And most of the biblical descriptions of judgment and hell come from him.

I think it's true to say that the coming of Jesus deepens and heightens both wrath and mercy. The wrath moves from being just temporary expressions of God's wrath to being eternal.

[ 23 : 42 ] And his mercy moves just from being the provision of a sacrificial system to the provision of his only son, who endures all the suffering of hell and all the pain of punishment for evil so that we don't have to.

This is where we need to concentrate. There is nothing more important than heaven and hell. And I know it feels like a little bit like this is relentless, but there is nothing more important for us.

You know, it's right for us week by week to try and think through how Christian faith bears on everyday life, on how we raise our children and what we do with our money. There's nothing more important than whether you'll be among those who stand on Mount Zion with the Lamb or fall with Babylon.

God doesn't reveal these things to us as a scare tactic. He's not frightened that if you knew who he really was, you wouldn't love him. The opposite is true.

C.S. Lewis writes, he says, the damned are, in one sense, successful rebels to the end. The doors of hell are locked on the inside.

[ 24 : 56 ] All that are in hell, choose it. I think it's probably right to say that the doctrine of hell does give moral meaning to our lives. But on that day, there will not be a single being who will be able to say anything that God has done is anything but flawless and good and right.

And that's the point of the last vision in the first four verses of 15. It's very interesting. The song that they sing and the song that ends our section today is not God's people praising him for salvation. I think of it was, that might be seen as self-motivated, even gleeful in the face of the judgment of others. But the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb are purely about the justice and righteousness and perfection of all that God has done in both salvation and judgment.

Great and amazing are your deeds, verse 3. 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. So when all is done, when God folds up this creation and unfurls the new, when the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and we are surrounded by a glass of fire mixed with glass, a sea of glass, the centre of our praise will not be so much what God has done for us.

[ 26 : 40 ] It will be who God is in his glory. And I think it's only this that explains the great explosion in the centre of blessing.

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, for they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them. True blessedness is to die in the Lord. We think of blessedness in terms of this life, having lots of stuff and great holidays, all of which are good. But there is something more important than life itself.

You will know and you will have seen in the bulletin that our beloved Jean Begg died this last week. And she was found at peace. She had been listening to a sermon and taking notes in a book. And now she rests from her labours and her deeds follow her. And she is blessed indeed in the presence of the Lamb, singing this new song. And in a world of fake news, this is real, this is true.

[ 27 : 46 ] And it's a call for us this morning to have humility, to trust in Jesus Christ, and with two hands to receive the blessing that he offers us, that he died to give us, and to pray for the desire to pass it on to others.

So let's kneel and pray together. Thank you.