

An Eternal Gospel: A Song to Sing / Evening Service

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[0 : 00] So I have these preachers that I like to listen to when I'm preaching through a series. And I've discovered that a lot of these folks that I really like, when they break up Revelation to preach through it, skip over these chapters.

They sort of preach up to maybe chapter 7 or something, and then skip right to chapter 21 where everything is made new and Jesus comes back and it's all great. And I understand that. This is very unsettling stuff, isn't it?

If we had to read this passage in the Old King James, we would have literally heard the phrase fire and brimstone. But like every week in Revelation, what's happening here is we're being taken up into heaven to see things that we couldn't possibly imagine or make up ourselves.

Things that are wonderful and things that are glorious and things that are disorienting and things that are really disturbing.

And this is one of those disturbing ones, I think. So let's just sort of been praying this week that we would humbly come before this passage and see what God would have us understand.

[1 : 16] So a little bit of an overview. Actually, no, let's do a context. Let's talk about the context first. Remember last week's sermon, which someone described to me last week as peripatetic, which I thought was a compliment until I googled it afterwards.

You should Google it. Anyway, so chapter 13 last week. So it was a reminder that we are in this kind of cosmic conflict. And we talked about how the dragon, the evil one, Satan, manipulates politics and religion and the powers that be and stuff in order to make it quite difficult to follow Jesus.

And chapter 13 was this reminder. It was saying, it's tough to publicly be Christian. And it explained why this was and what was going on in the background.

What was going on if you sort of peeled the curtain back and looked backstage there. And the call last week, there was two calls last week. There was two sort of exhortations there with us.

One, don't be naive about the spiritual realities that are shaping the world. And the second call was a call to endurance.

[2 : 32] It was a call to stick with Jesus. And that endurance call, that's actually a huge one in Revelation. In fact, that's probably the main application of the book. It's stay faithful to Jesus.

It's endure, endure in the face of. And now if we go right back to the start of the very book, you remember those little letters, seven little letters to seven little churches. Endure in the face of false teaching.

Endure in the face of immorality. Endure in the face of explicit anti-Christian forces or sentiment. Endure in the face of the temptation just to nod off, just to sort of fall asleep at the wheel.

Now this week, the application is also endure. We see that in verse 12. Here is a call. This is what it says. Here is a call for endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

So whatever else you get out of this passage, whatever else you think it's talking about, it's talking about endurance. It's God wanting us to stick with Jesus and recognizing that that can be very difficult.

[3 : 41] Now the incentive, though, to stick with Jesus is, it's not an incentive I would choose when encouraging people. The incentive is this.

If you trust in Jesus, your eternal future is wonderful beyond imagination. If you reject Jesus, you will go to hell for eternity.

Now this is difficult subject matter. And it would be easier not to deal with it and not to talk about it and not to consider it.

But there's a danger in doing that. If we don't have a robust idea of God's judgment and God's holiness, it actually harms the gospel.

It depletes the gospel. I'll explain that more later on. But let's get into the passage. Chapter 14, if you have the Bible open in front of you there, it sort of breaks up quite cleanly.

[4 : 37] Chapter 14 I'm just talking about at the start here. It breaks up quite cleanly into three sections. So we'll start with the first section and work our way through. Section 1, verses 1 to 5.

It's fabulously encouraging stuff. It's a picture of Jesus with his people. We have this symbolic 144,000 who, remember, we don't take this number literally.

It represents the whole church. It represents God's people. And John sees this vision of all the people that belong to God who will join him in eternity. And what do we learn about these people? What we see first, that they belong to God.

They're described as having a mark, a mark of God on their foreheads, in contrast to the beast, previous chapter, who does the same to his people. That means that God has you. You're his.

God's got a hold of you. That's wonderful. We also see that these people, they love to sing. John hears a choir in verse 2, and he kind of heaps on all these words to try and describe it. He says it's like a roaring water, like Niagara.

[5 : 36] It's like thunder. It's like harps. And harps, by the way, are the happy instruments of the Bible. So when you hear the word harps in the Bible, think banjos.

That's what it was to them. It was their banjo. So John hears singing. And in the beginning of chapter 15, right at the bottom there, we hear the words of the song.

God's people love to sing. That's what we learn about God's people. We also learn this, that they didn't defile themselves with women, verse 4, which doesn't sound very respectful, does it? Especially if you're a woman. Especially this weekend with marches, etc.

Timing's not great. But remember, this is symbolic language. The Bible does not say that sex is a dirty thing. In fact, you will know this from the Old Testament, that the relationship between God and his church is described in many ways.

Marriage, for example, but also lover. So I think this is talking about faithfulness, but using the picture of a person who's promised themselves to another person in marriage and doesn't sleep around in the meantime.

[6 : 49] So verse 4 is saying, you've promised yourself to Jesus, and you've remained faithful to that promise. You haven't slept around on Christ by saying something like this, I love you, Jesus. I love you, Jesus.

You're so great. But I kind of actually just trust in my money, and I really just trust in my job. I really just kind of are counting on my looks to get me through life.

That's the picture there. That's what that's about. Verse 4 also says that God's people follow Jesus where he goes. It's an active thing. Verse 4, it is these who follow the land wherever he goes.

Jesus was very big. You know this. Jesus was huge on saying, follow me. Faith is an active thing. It's not a static thing. What else do we learn? It says that God's people were redeemed.

That's such a great word. It literally means ransomed. It's like God's people were purchased by God at a price. It's talking about Christ's death, of course, which is why Christians can be described as blameless in verse 5, because of the cross.

[7 : 52] So you have the moral record of Christ to present to God, not your own moral record. Isn't that wonderful? That's good news for everybody. It says that there's no lie found on our lips.

What does that mean? It's not introducing some moral superiority of Christians here. It's talking about the fact that these are people that they told the truth about Jesus, even in a society where they're under pressure to probably lie about their faith.

So this is John's vision here in chapter 14. It's just really wonderful picture of what it means to be the people of God. That's the first section. Then John sees an angel overhead, verse 6.

And the angel proclaims the gospel, the passage says. And it gives them the right response to the gospel, which is to glorify God.

But there's a bit of an edge to it. It would appear to be God's final appeal to the world. So we're talking about a future thing here. People have one more chance. And this is, of course, a kindness.

[8 : 57] God gives people another chance, one more chance. And he tells everybody, you've got one more chance. Because the angel announces the hour of judgment has come. And this is where in the chapter, the focus shifts from talking about the people of God to talking about the people of the beast, those who don't respond to the gospel.

It talks about, it focuses on their eternal destiny. But before we get there, I want you to notice something very interesting. Do you notice how the people there in verses sort of 6, 7, 8 around there, they're called to glorify God.

Why are they called to glorify God? They describe God as creator and judge. Very interesting, I think. Creator and judge. Now, it's very interesting they put those things like that beside each other.

In my experience, those Christians who are really big on God as creator are a bit weak on God as judge. And those Christians who are really big on God as judge, but weak on the idea of God as creator and creation care, it's important to get those things right and in balance and together and side by side.

And then we have three pictures of judgment after one another. 9 and 11, the first one, verses 9 and 11.

[10 : 18] It says that God's wrath is poured out. And it says that those who have followed the beast will be tormented with fire and sulfur, and the smoke of the torment will rise forever. Then the second image of judgment, 14 to 16, a picture of a grain harvest.

It says the hour has come, and Christ himself wields a sickle, and the earth is reaped. Lastly, 17 to 19, this is a grape harvest.

An angel also has a sickle and gathers up the grapes and pours them into this massive winepress of God's wrath, and the winepress is trodden down. This blood pours out of the winepress, and it's as high as a horse's bridle, and it flows out of the winepress for hundreds of kilometers.

So, why three pictures of judgment, and why so much detail? It's because they all communicate different things about God's judgment.

God's judgment, of course, is his holy response to evil. So, the first, the fire and brimstone, the fire and sulfur image of verse 10, that's trying to communicate what the experience of being judged, the experience of hell will be like, and it's an awful thing, and there'll be real suffering.

[11 : 38] They're also trying to communicate the truth that hell will be eternal. There are theologians who I really like, and are so much cleverer than I am, who believe in doctrine of annihilation, where there is a judgment, and then God destroys people completely, so there's no ongoing consciousness.

I don't see how you can come to that conclusion with a passage like this. So, this first symbol is about the experience of hell, and I remember, these are symbols, but that shouldn't soften it.

Jonathan Edwards is this great 18th century theologian, thought of as probably America's greatest theologian thus far. He said the biblical language for hell was symbolic, but he said, and I quote now, when metaphors are used in scripture about spiritual things, they fall short of the literal truth.

So, to say that the scriptural image of hellfire is not wholly literal, that's not a comfort. The reality is worse than the image, which also means that the pictures of heaven, these incredible pictures of heaven, heaven will be far more beautiful than it's pictured as well.

So, the first picture, the experience and the time, the second picture, this is Jesus with the sickle, verse 14, the grain harvest. Two things about this, I think. It's very interesting, I think, that Jesus' role in judgment here.

[13 : 11] Jesus is not the nice guy of the Bible, staying away from all the distasteful stuff. In fact, Jesus talks more about hell than anyone in the Bible, and he did that because he didn't want anyone to go there. Here, Jesus wields the sickle of judgment.

The second thing I think I want to point out here in the second image is that there's a lot of timing language in the second image. Help us to see that God is actually working to a timetable.

There is a day of judgment in mind. The day has come. The earth is ripe, it says. In the ancient Near East, it was governed by the agrarian calendar. This happened, this happened, this happened, this happened.

This is how your life was governed. And verse 15 says that God has a timetable. Judgment will happen according to his schedule. The last, the grape harvest, 16 to 20, the pressing of the grapes, the gushing blood.

Why all the detail here? It's God's plan to remake the world and make it beautiful and wonderful and whole. But God must destroy evil and remake everything.

[14 : 12] And this enormous harvest of grapes tells us that the judgment of God on evil will be thorough and it will be complete and there will be no more evil after that.

So there's three images. What do we learn? God's judgment will be experienced as torment. It will be eternal.

That Jesus resides over it. That there will be a day that it happens. There is a certainty around this. That it will be thorough. It will be complete.

Now, I don't know what you make of all of that. Perhaps you think that's incredibly unjust. Eternal horror for the minor disobedience of not embracing the Christian faith.

Perhaps that's on your mind. Perhaps you think it's very unfair. Perhaps you think the idea of God being angry is repugnant to you even though you sort of feel like you can be angry about things.

[15 : 15] But no, God can't. Perhaps you wonder why God has to do it all at all. Why can't he just not do this? Surely that's an option. Well, if that's true, I just want to...

God, there's so much to say about this. I just want to offer one thought that might be helpful to wrapping your head around this. Here's that thought.

Hell is a place that you choose. Hell is God giving people what they have freely chosen their whole life.

God... So someone wants to be the master of their own fate, the one who decides everything. Hell is God banishing them to the place that they've been trying to get to their whole lives. A place where they can eternally reject God.

Packer says this. He says, Scripture sees hell as self-chosen. Hell appears as God's gesture of respect for human choice. All receive what they actually choose. Either to be with God forever, worshipping him, or without him worshipping themselves.

[16 : 27] We could say it like this. You get in the afterlife what you most wanted in this life. You want God as your master, you spend eternity with him. You want yourself as your master, you get eternity without him.

But, that last statement has to be nuanced, doesn't it? Because you actually don't get to experience eternity ignoring God and hell, doing your own thing, having a bit of fun with your buddies.

Verse 10 reminds us that we are actually present to God somehow and how. I don't know what this looks like. But we will only experience the anger of God there.

So, perhaps another way to say it is this. Hell is a place where the consequences of our self-determination are experienced forever. And again, you might think, well, that's not so bad.

Like, I can handle God being angry with me. I'll just kind of do my own thing. Why is it such a horrible place? Well, I want you to think about this. Think about, well, we know now, perhaps you know people like this, that people that live a life of singular self-interest end up being miserable, don't they?

[17 : 49] Because you end up being less human, in a sense. You become further and further. You move further and further away from what God intended you to be. Because we were made to be with God.

In a good relationship, God. In a right relationship with Him. So hell, is God leading you into the full implications of your choice to reject Him? And Tim Keller is very good on this.

Here's what he says. He says, when describing the sort of why it's going to be such a horror, why you can't just hang out with your buddies and it'll be alright, you know. He says, why do they use the word fire there?

He says, because fire is a disintegration word. And he says this, away from the favour and face of God, we literally, horrifically, and endlessly fall apart.

So I hope you see that our passage tonight doesn't describe a petty deity losing his temper and going a bit overboard. Hell in judgment.

[18 : 53] It's people experiencing the natural, and just consequences of their rejection of God forever. Now, you might not buy this.

So, let me direct you to the song in Revelation 15 that John heard. Let me read that to you. 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.

So this is the song that John hears at the beginning of chapter 14. God's people are singing. And you might not have bought much of what I've said tonight, but do you see that, do you see what they glorify God about?

It would seem that in heaven, after the final judgment of God, no one is saying anything except God.

[20 : 01] Just and true and righteous are your ways. So now, before the end comes, before judgment comes, the call of the passages, folks, endure.

stick with Jesus even when it's tough. Jesus, who on the cross experienced this hell. Jesus, who experienced the wrath of God so that we wouldn't have to.

Amen. Amen.