

# "The Harvest of the Earth"

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Revelation chapter 14? That's page 972 in the Pew Bible.

We're going to look at the whole chapter today, Revelation 14. As you turn there, let me ask, how was it waking up this morning?

Did you wake up with the morning sun, ready to tackle the day, full of joy? Or did you have to drag yourself out of bed and muscle through and shake your fist at the St. Patrick's Day race on the way to town this morning, whatever it was for you?

You know, the spiritual life, life in God's Spirit as a follower of Jesus, can sometimes be like waking up, ready to tackle the day. But sometimes it can also feel like needing to drag yourself out of bed and muscle through.

That is, sometimes it can feel hard to persevere, to keep up, and to carry on. And that's how many of the Christians felt to whom this book of Revelation was originally written.

[ 1 : 17 ] They lived in the last third of the first century. The Roman Empire around them was powerful and, for many, comfortable and seemed to promise prosperity and peace.

That is, it promised those things so long as you got with the program, burned your incense to the emperor as God, and got in line with the political economy of the empire, which went something like conquer, oppress, tax, repeat.

Now, Christians were already on the outside of the dominant culture. After all, worshiping a crucified Jew from Palestine wasn't going to win you any immediate points with your neighbors.

But as the emperor cult began to increase, Christians found that more costly forms of oppression were on the rise. Some had even been martyred at this point for refusing to worship the beast of Rome.

And so, they needed strength to endure, to persevere, to keep up and carry on. And the truth is, so do we.

[ 2 : 29 ] When hard times come, when it looks easier to just go along with the world around us, we can be tempted to just give up or give in.

And so, it's to hearts just like our own that Revelation 14 was written. Before we dive into each section, look down with me at verse 12, if you have it open.

In verse 12, we read, Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. John, the writer of Revelation, wants to fuel our endurance.

He's writing this so that we will keep up and keep on, persevere in faith and obedience. That's the big idea. And each section of this chapter gives us, then, a reason to persevere.

To persevere in faith, that is, in trust in the Lord Jesus, and to persevere in obedience to God's commands. That is, His Word and His ways that are written for our flourishing.

[ 3 : 37 ] So, let's take a look at each paragraph, then, and hear these encouragements to endurance, to perseverance in faith and obedience. The first thing that John is going to point to in verses 1 through 5 is joy.

He's saying here, keep up and keep on, because there is joy for those who persevere. There's joy for those who persevere. Let me read verses 1 through 5. John says, 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.

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, and they were singing a new song before the Lord, and before the Lord, 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. 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. And in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless. Now, we saw earlier in Revelation, in chapter 7, that this 144,000 is a way of speaking about the church.

[ 5 : 03 ] It's a symbolic number picking up the Old Testament number 12 for the 12 tribes of Israel, and the number 1,000, which is a complete number, a number denoting fullness. So we have here 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes equaling 144,000, right?

And then Revelation, chapter 7, immediately juxtaposes that symbolic counting of God's people with a vision of a multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

So these two pictures together show us that this symbolic numbering of the people of God is giving us a picture of the church in its fullness, in its completeness.

Not one is missing. Everyone on whom God has set His saving favor and love in Christ, each one is counted for. But this numbering of the people of God also reminds us of the Old Testament book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Old Testament, that begins with God numbering the people He has redeemed from Egypt, right?

And why is God numbering them? Because they're getting ready to march to the promised land, and the way to the promised land is through the wilderness.

[ 6 : 20 ] In fact, the Hebrew title of the book of Numbers is Bamidbar, in the wilderness, which seems like a more exciting title than Numbers, right? You know?

The people are numbered because they're getting ready to march through wilderness and trial and eventually into battle. So the image of 144,000 in Revelation is a picture of God's people, not just numbered and known, but counted and prepared for trials and even spiritual battle.

And when you consider the context of chapter 14, it makes sense that John would return to this particular image of the church. Why? Well, because in chapters 12 and 13, leading up to this, John has been showing us the great spiritual battle between Satan, the accuser, and the church.

At the end of chapter 12, the dragon is pictured as raging against the church, and then in chapter 13, he raises up two beasts that will make war on the saints to conquer them. And it seems in those chapters as if the whole world goes after this unholy trinity, this counterfeit God of the dragon and his two beasts.

And as Pastor Matt showed us last week, this strategy of counterfeiting and beastly deception and violence isn't just describing something that happened in the past, nor is it just talking about something that will happen in the future, but it's describing an ongoing pattern of this spiritual war throughout the church age.

[ 7 : 46 ] But the question is, how? How's the church going to fare in the midst of this war? What will become of God's people known and loved? What will happen to the church while the many beasts down through history do their best to take the place of God and sweep the nations up in their programs of power and propaganda and attempt to trample the church of the crucified and risen Jesus?

Well, chapter 14 shows us. The people of God we see here are safe. They are preserved. Not one is lost.

They numbered 144,000 in chapter 7, and despite the wilderness, despite the war, 144,000 they remain. Jesus says in John 10, 28, I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Jesus preserves his church. He preserves them here in number, and we see he preserves them here in purity and holiness. Look at verses 4 and 5. Verse 4 speaks of holiness of body.

Verse 5 speaks of holiness of speech. And then right in the middle, we see a picture of holiness of heart, right? They follow the Lamb wherever He goes. They belong to Him like the first portion of the harvest was gladly given to God, the first fruits.

[ 9 : 14 ] Now, this picture of holiness is obviously painted with broad strokes by John. Verse 4 doesn't mean that every single Christian ought to remain single their whole life, right? No, sex we know is a good gift from God.

It's meant to be enjoyed in the context of marriage, and there's forgiveness and healing for those who have fallen short, right? What is it that makes the church blameless? It's the grace of God and the righteousness of Christ, not our works.

But the point that John wants to drive home here in verses 4 and 5 is that the church, despite all that the dragon and his beasts throw against it, the church remains wholly devoted to the Lamb who stands firm in his heavenly Zion, reigning as the world's true king, even though imposters try to usurp his rightful place in every age.

Now, that brings us to the center of the paragraph, verses 2 and 3. This 144,000 who are preserved in number and preserved in holiness, they hear a song. Flooding down from the hills of Zion is the sound of an orchestra, and on it, waves of a new song are brought forth from the throne of God. And this new song is not one that just anybody can sing. No, this song, this song only finds its place on the tongues and the hearts of whom.

[10:38] The church, the 144,000, those saints who have marched through the wilderness, who have known the scars of battle, this song is theirs, and it's theirs alone.

You see, Christian, there's a special joy for you, a unique song for you, because you have fought the good fight.

A song that only you will sing, a joy that only you will know, together with those who have fought by your side. And of course, it's a song that we can sing right now.

This joy that's being described here, this song, isn't only for a future day, it's flowing down the slopes of Zion and into our ears even now. From what we've seen from Revelation, how might we trace out the contours of this new song?

The crucified lamb has conquered. Sin and death have been defeated. My sin, though great, has been forgiven. And even the worst that the dragon throws against you will be turned to your good because of God's sovereign purpose, plan, and love for his people.

[12:04] When the enemy sends his scorching heat and you think your streams will all be dried up, God causes that heat to produce clouds.

The clouds grow heavy with rain, and in season, God causes the rains to fall, and they bring you refreshment and joy. What Satan meant for evil, God turns to good.

Or when the enemy sends his dark coldness and you think that all life and light and heat are gone, God causes the snow to bring, God causes that cold to bring snow.

And the snow falls gently, and the landscape that once seemed barren is now white and beautiful once again. The new song is the song of the redeemed.

It's a song for all those in Christ. It's a song of joy for those who persevere. Christian, do you know something of this song? The song of joy?

[13:07] Perhaps you need to spend some time with an older saint, one who has faced more trials than you, and listen to their life and to their story and learn some of the notes of this song of joy.

But be assured of this, God will grant you his joy as you persevere in faith and obedience. It is not a lifeless or endlessly somber road that he calls you to walk.

No, God will meet you on the road with joy, and the strains of the heavenly new song will come to your ears and encourage your heart.

So keep up and keep on, because there's joy for those who persevere. In the next section of Revelation 14, John will turn our sights from joy to rest.

Keep up and keep on, because there is rest for those who persevere. Let me read verses 6 through 13. John writes, 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.

[14:16] 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. 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. And another angel a third followed them, saying with a loud voice, If anyone worships the beast or 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. 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.

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. You know, when we face hardships or trials in the Christian life, it can feel at times like there's simply no rest and no comfort to be found.

[ 15 : 47 ] And then, you know, when we get into that place, kind of spiritually and emotionally, we can be tempted to look at the world around us and think that we see there a picture of just the opposite.

You know, we think, they're not struggling with faith or obedience. They've cast those things aside and now they seem at ease. They seem at rest. Why not just join them? Why not just give in? Life is short. Am I really supposed to take up a cross and follow Jesus? What sort of life is that? It's easy to get in that place.

But remember the words of Jesus, friends. What does it profit someone, Jesus once said, to gain the whole world and to lose your soul? Life is short.

There is no doubt about that. But friends, eternity is very long. James Joyce in his novel, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, describes eternity using this powerful metaphor.

[ 16 : 49 ] I'm just going to paraphrase it. You know, he says, imagine a beach and all those grains of sand. And then he says, take those grains of sand and pile them up as high as you can go. A thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand miles.

Make a pillar of that sand. Now picture a bird coming and taking one grain of that sand and flying away. And every year the bird returns. How many years would it take for the bird to diminish that pillar of sand?

And Joyce says, when it gets to the bottom, eternity's just begun. Friends, eternity's very long. And what verse 13 tells us is that there is a rest to come for those in the Lord that far outstrips any temporal rest or ease this world might be able to offer.

Whatever rest you feel like you're forgoing now, oh, friends, it's no sacrifice at all compared to what waits in eternity. You know, this rest was written into the very fabric of creation.

This rest. God embodied in the Old Testament instructions this rest as he told his people to keep the Sabbath day over and over and again. It was this picture.

[ 18 : 15 ] This weekly Sabbath rest was pointing to something much greater than a simple temporary pause and our labor as necessary as that is. Right?

This pattern of Sabbath was pointing to an even greater Sabbath, a greater rest, an eternal Sabbath rest. And this real gift of this eternal rest, what is it?

How would we describe it? Well, friends, it is to be welcomed and to be unashamed in the very presence of God. You know, what you and I were created for, what the real deepest longing of our heart is, is communion with God, union with Him.

And that's why verse 13 can say something that sounds, you know, almost paradoxical to our ears. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Well, they're blessed because they're present with the One who created them.

And in the Lord, all their sins are forgiven and they are welcomed and unafraid. And there's this wonderful phrase, they rest from their labors, but their deeds follow them.

[ 19 : 33 ] Think about that. On the one hand, the day is coming when we will get to rest from our labors. No more striving, suffering, persevering. We will step into the eternal Sabbath.

The rest of Christ will be ours forever forever because He is our Sabbath rest. And at the same time, John says, our deeds will follow us. Now, what does that mean?

Well, do you remember Ephesians 2 where Paul says that God has saved us by His grace, but He's prepared in advance for us good works that we ought to do? We've been created by grace for the works that God prepared in advance for us to do.

And what John's pointing us to here is that those works of faith and obedience that God prepared in advance for us to do in the strength of His grace, they won't be lost.

They aren't meaningless or absurd. God in His infinite grace will take our imperfect labors in this life and sweep them up into His eternal kingdom and into the new heavens and new earth to come.

[ 20 : 42 ] And friends, that will be ultimate rest. To know not just that your labors can finally cease, but that all you've struggled and strived for will play a part in the new world God is creating.

So don't give up, brothers and sisters. Keep up and keep on. But John here also issues a warning. For the Christian, there is eternal rest that awaits them.

But for those who've rejected Christ, there is eternal unrest. As the angelic messengers ring forth in John's vision, they proclaim the gospel that Christ died for sinners and that all who turn to Him shall be saved.

And then they announce that Babylon, the worldly city, will fall. And that for those who have rejected God in Christ and who have knowingly or unknowingly given their allegiance to the evil one, God's judgment will come.

And their eternal state will be one of conscious, unending unrest. The smoke of their torment, John says, goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest day or night.

[ 21 : 59 ] What keeps you up at night? Anxieties? Fears? Guilt? Shame?

Regret? Friend, to die and to be without Christ, without His shed blood forgiving your sins, to be separated once and for all from the presence of God, what will be left for us?

There will be no rest, John says. Having spent your whole life refusing God's mercy, the time will come when God says, once and for all, thy will be done.

And when God removes His mercy, all that remains will be the undiluted opposition of God to sin.

The wine of God's wrath poured full strength into the cup of His anger.

In the ancient world, when they served wine at a party, they would often dilute it with water to kind of make it go a little further and to take the strength down. The image here is of a cup utterly unmixed, utterly undiluted, handed to drink.

[ 23 : 17 ] This is what you've wanted, and now in judgment, it is what you receive. The scriptures teach quite clearly and terribly that for those who refuse the gospel of Jesus Christ, the only future for them is conscious, eternal, and horrible.

Many have questioned whether we can believe such a thing. Doesn't this kind of seem a little unfair of God, we ask? How could eternal punishment be a just sentence for finite human rejection of God, right?

We've only, like, rejected God for a finite number of years. How can an infinite punishment be at all just? But the problem, friends, is that we're thinking about things in that way.

When we frame things that way, we're thinking about things in a very human-centered way, not in a God-centered way. You see, God is infinitely beautiful, good, and merciful.

And to sin against an infinitely worthy object justly requires an infinite sentence. You know, if I visited your home and kind of maybe intentionally sort of broke one of your mugs, you know, it's like, you know, I don't like the chiefs, you know, whatever.

[ 24 : 39 ] What would the penalty be? Like, five, ten bucks, you know? Maybe you had to order it on the internet so it's like, twenty, because they're shipping. But what if I broke the heirloom vase in your china cupboard, the one that's been passed down in your family for generations that's, like, not replaceable?

Like, what would the penalty be then? Thousands of dollars? Tens of thousands of dollars? You see, it's the object of the offense that determines the kind of weight and justice of the punishment, right?

But what if it wasn't a mug or a vase, right? What if I harmed your spouse or your child? What would be the cost then?

Can you even put a dollar amount to that? Would a million dollars even begin to repay what I've done? And now, what about the infinitely worthy God who made you and the world and everything in it, who keeps you and everything beautiful in this creation existing every single second?

What if I live not just one day, but every day rejecting Him, ignoring Him, dishonoring Him, using His creation for my own ends to His dishonor, rebelling against Him?

[ 26 : 07 ] sin. Sin against the eternal God justly demands an eternal punishment. And that's why the first angel flies forth proclaiming the eternal gospel.

There's only one who could pay the eternal sentence of sin. Who is worthy enough to pay the penalty not just for one sinner, but for every sinner who repents and believes?

Who could possibly pay that infinite mountain, that pillar of infinite sand that we've accumulated because of our rejection of God?

It's obvious, right? Only God is worthy to pay that penalty. Only if God were to descend into the darkness of wrath and sin, only if God were to experience the terrible unrest of sin's penalty, only

then could we ever hope to be saved, only if God chose to do that in our place. And friends, that is exactly the gospel, the good news. In Jesus Christ, God took human flesh to live and to die to pay that horrible sentence.

[ 27 : 41 ] On the cross, Jesus descended into the depths of wrath to pay sin's awful, infinite cost. And on the cross, do you know what Jesus said? It's finished.

The infinite cost has been paid because the infinite God became finite and died for you. And now the offer comes forth.

Will you receive that gift or will you continue to push it away to your own demise? Friends, there is eternal rest for all who trust in Christ.

And he says to all of us today, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. He's the only one who can do it. He's the only one who can give you that rest.

You're not going to get it from church attendance, although church attendance is good. You're not going to get it from trying to be a good moral person, although we need more of those around, right? And you're not going to get it from trying to be a more spiritual or religious person.

[ 28 : 44 ] It's not going to be external religion or good moral effort or spiritual connection with the divine. You're not going to find the rest there. It's only in Jesus.

Come to me, he says, and I will give you rest. Have you stopped trying to rest in your own record and your own efforts and your own supposed goodness?

Have you stopped resting in those things? And have you rested in him? That's the invitation for all of us today. And if you do rest in him, then this is the promise for you, that there is eternal rest for you now and in the age to come.

So don't give up and don't give in. Well, let's look finally at the last section of chapter 14. John has held up for us joy and rest, and lastly, he's going to point us to justice.

Keep up and keep on because there is justice for those who persevere. Let me read verses 14 through 20. 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.

[ 29 : 58 ] 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.

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. 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.

Now we've seen that Revelation presents the return of Christ multiple times throughout the book and from multiple perspectives. And here's another one of those pictures of Christ, the Son of Man, the one on the cloud, his return in glory to save and to judge at the end of history.

And here the image is a harvest, right? And actually, there's two harvests here. In the first harvest, the Son of Man, that is Jesus, gathers the ripe grain into his barn, right?

[ 31 : 23 ] And I think this is a picture of Jesus gathering his people into his presence at the end of the age. And it's a comforting picture. Harvests were times of rejoicing and celebration and that day will be one of great joy as Christ comes and gathers us to himself.

But there's a second harvest in verses 17 through 20. And this image strikes us at first as very troubling. What's pictured is a grape harvest and the grapes are gathered and then crushed in a winepress.

But we're told that this winepress is the wrath of God. That is God's ultimate rejection of evil. And what flows from the winepress is a shocking scene.

1600 stadia was about 200 miles, give or take. And that's approximately the length of the Old Testament, the length of the Old Testament land of Israel, right? And in the symbolic language of Revelation, what we're meant to take away, I think, is that this is a picture of complete worldwide judgment.

Now what are we meant to take away from this picture? Well, we've seen many times in Revelation that the coming judgment is meant to be a warning. It's a warning calling us to turn to God and

receive his forgiveness.

[ 32 : 45 ] forgiveness. But judgment and justice is also meant to be a comfort. A comfort not for the comfortable, not for the powerful, not for the emperor and his wicked, self-exalting designs.

But justice is meant to be a comfort for the powerless and for the comfortless, for the downtrodden, for the weak, for the oppressed, for the poor. For the Christians in the first century and in the 21st century who are being unjustly persecuted, imprisoned, killed, the coming justice of God is good news because it means one day evil will end.

Wickedness will end. Injustice and oppression will end. It will all be gathered into the winepress of God and crushed no more to threaten his people or his world anymore.

And God's judgment will be perfect. You know, our system of justice is far from perfect, right?

Mistakes are made. Lawyers and judges can be corrupt. Humans cannot possibly judge perfectly.

But God can and God will. On that day, no one will question the rightness of his judgment. It will be seen as perfect justice.

[ 34 : 14 ] And that means oppression will cease and wars will cease and hunger and violence will be no more. They will go into the winepress of his wrath never to return.

Yes, it's a sobering picture, but for those who are crushed under the weight of evil and sin and oppression, it's a picture of hope that it will not last.

Do you see how this message of God's coming justice, this harvest, is meant to help suffering Christians persevere in faith and obedience? Evil and wrong won't have the last word. The tyrants and the bullies that prey on the weak will come to an end.

So John is saying, keep up and keep on. Though it looks like evil is winning. Though it looks like every effort to stand up for love and forgiveness and peace, even though that looks like a lost cause.

Though it seems like living in righteousness and praying for justice are a dead end. When you're so tempted to pick up the means that this world holds forth as the means to an end.

[ 35 : 20 ] Don't do it. Don't give up. The seeds that you are sowing now, though they seem like a mustard seed, they will grow, they will take root, and the harvest will come.

Evil and death and all the world systems that prop them up will be crushed never again to rise. And the mustard seeds of faith and hope and love will be seen to be the real lasting fruit.

And the Son of Man will gather it to Himself and His kingdom will be forever. And the new heavens and the new earth will be a garden and a city where righteousness dwells forever.

True and lasting justice is coming, saints. Persevere in faith. Persevere in obedience. Don't give up. Let's pray.

Amen. Father, we ask that you would, by your Holy Spirit, work into our hearts a perseverance born from the deep joy that we have in you, from the rest that you promise us, and from the great justice that will come.

[ 36 : 51 ] Lord, help us to run this race with endurance, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. In His name we pray. Amen.