

A Call to Endurance

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Revelation 14:1-13

Today, we return to our series on the book of Revelation. As I've said before, much of Revelation can be interpreted in numerous ways. A lot of my explanations come from the "Believers Church Bible Commentary" and various studies I've participated in over the years. Many Christians see the book of Revelation as kind of a roadmap for the end of the world. They look for signs in the chapters that may connect with today, believing that maybe the world will end soon. Yet, throughout history, there have been terrible wars, persecution, and plagues (or pandemics). Often, people thought the end of the world was near, and they feared the terrible images of pain and suffering found in the book. But, we must remember that Revelation was very much an encouraging book. It was good news to a group of Christians who were being persecuted. God is still in control. The message, in some ways, could be summed up in verse 12 of today's chapter, "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus." Things may be tough in your life, and you may be tempted to give up. Stand firm in the faith of Jesus Christ. In the end, he has have the victory over evil. The message is not, "Follow Jesus and you will avoid suffering." The faithful "saints" are called to endure. That means keeping their faith even while they suffer. Suffering will end and prayers will be answered. We need not fear. God will give strength, and God will not allow evil to continue forever.

Instead of it being a description of how the world will end, Revelation gives us a series of paintings, images reminding us that God is in control. Each scene repeats themes of judgement on evil, and encouragement for the faithful. Rather than a description of what will happen first, second, and so-on at the end of the world, the various hardships and tribulations described in the book of Revelation represent things people experience throughout history. Those who walk as Jesus walked, likely will experience suffering as Jesus did. His way, is a way of love and non-violence. It's the way represented by the symbol of the slaughtered Lamb. Jesus did not fight for God. Instead, he allowed himself to be tortured and hung on a cross for our sins. It's hard enough to imagine how someone would die for someone else, but for the perfect and divine Son of God to die for us, it's beyond imagination.

As in other chapters of Revelation, today's chapter has so many symbols that I won't try to explain everything. I'll just highlight some of them, concentrating on the first part of the chapter. John, the writer begins with a scene where the "Lamb" (representing Jesus) is standing on Mount Zion. It could be a literal place in heaven or on earth, or it could represent a spiritual realm. The Lamb standing on the mountain is a strong contrast to the beast from the bottomless pit that we read about in earlier chapters. Also, earlier we read about the 144,000. These people stand with the Lamb. They have received the mark of the Lamb, in contrast to the mark of the beast. Here it is described as the name of Jesus and of God. Names reflected the character of the one named, so it could be a way of describing how followers of the Lamb reflect the non-violent and loving character of Jesus Christ, and the followers of the beast reflect the lying and deceiving character of Satan. It's a contrast between those who are faithful to Christ and those who reject him in order to follow other ways, such as following the beast of personal recognition or financial success. The number 144,000 most likely symbolizes the 12 tribes of Israel, as well as the 12 disciples, and all the followers who came after them. Twelve times twelve, times 1,000 comes to 144,000. These are the ones who have given their lives to Christ, the ones who are faithful to God.

A loud voice comes from heaven sounding like many waters. It's the voice of God, representing power and authority. We can imagine a sound like waves crashing against rocks. We read that it also sounds like thunder. In biblical times thunder often represented God's judgement. So, we can expect that what follows may be images of judgement against evil. But, here comes a surprise. The sound is also like harpists playing their harps. What a contrast! Typically, the purpose of harp music was to comfort people. David was a young man hired to play his harp in order help king Saul calm down

when he was stressed out, according to 1st Samuel 16, verse 23. The sound includes singing, people singing a new song, most likely a song of gratitude and thanksgiving for God's salvation. So, what follows is both an encouragement to the faithful, and judgement on evil.

I'll just make one more point about this section. Here it talks about the redeemed (or saved) people being virgins. Throughout the Bible, marriage is highly celebrated and so this passage is not likely meant to discourage people from getting married. The people being virgins most likely has a spiritual meaning. The faithful ones follow Christ, the Lamb "wherever he goes," being obedient to God. They have stayed away from the practices of the "whore," Babylon. Like a prostitute, Babylon can tempt us away from a pure, "spiritual marriage" with Christ. More details of the "evil city," Babylon come later, in chapter 17. We are often tempted and drawn to the promises of pleasure if we follow the ways of Babylon. But, seeking after the world's pleasures, we are then drawn away from Christ. Looking at it another way, these days we may be tempted to follow the parade, making a good show for everyone, and getting applause. Yet, the way of Christ is often more like taking a country road, following a simple life, out of the spotlight, maybe doing some very difficult actions in order to be faithful to God's leading, but actions that no one might ever even notice... The way of Christ is humble. It's faithful, obedient, and truthful. We read about the faithful ones that, "in their mouth no lie was found..." This is a direct contrast to the lies of the "beast."

Following this section, there is a passage with three different angels. The first proclaims the gospel, (the good news) and gives a message to all the earth, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgement has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water." The second angel declares the destruction of Babylon, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication." Here we see imagery of Babylon as a prostitute. Finally, a third angel declares the fate of those who follow Babylon and the beast. They would "drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they 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..."

Wow! There's a lot here to "unpack"! First of all, scholars do not agree on what this all means. Many truly believe that God is gracious and loving, but there will come a time when God's patience wears out. Jesus first came with love, but when he comes again as judge, then all the "evil people" will be crushed. This violence does not fit with the character of Jesus, the Lamb. God has already shown how non-violent love is stronger than violent destruction of any enemies. So, how might we better understand the wrath of God?

I'd like to look at some verses from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 1. In verse 18, it says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth." Paul continues with explanations how people substitute idols or put other things in the place where God should be in their lives. Then we come to the details of God's wrath. Starting in chapter 1 verse 24 he says, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator..." Paul continues, "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions....", and so on. And again, Paul finally says, "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, strife, deceit..." and the list continues. God's wrath is not like human wrath. God is not out there saying, "Worship me! Or I will torture you until you do!" This does not reflect the loving God we see described in the Bible. But, God is holy and just. Because God loves everyone, God's strong judgement comes against all evil. In other words, it comes against all things that go against our love, joy, peace, and truth. God has created everything so that evil has consequences. According to Paul, the wrath of God is seen when God withdraws from us. It's like God saying, "OK, you don't

want to follow me? You are free to go your own way and see where that get you.” God “gives us up” to our own ways.

The natural consequences bring us to a miserable state. It’s like the story of the son who rejected his father and ran away with his inheritance, spending it on the pleasures of the city. He ends up losing all his money, and starving, he takes one of the lowest jobs, feeding pigs. He’s hit rock bottom – the natural effects of rejecting God. But, this hardship causes him to realise that his way was wrong, and he decides to return to his father – an image of repentance, turning back to God.

Today’s passage also talks about the torments of fire and sulfur. This is likely a reference to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It’s possible that these cities may have been destroyed by a fiery volcano, but they were also judged as cities of wickedness. Fire is a traditional symbol of judgment. Many people have an image of hell being a place of unquenchable fire, but there are also Bible passages that describe hell as a place of darkness. These two things don’t go together. You can have either black darkness, or fire lighting up the area. These descriptions are more likely symbols. In a later chapter of Revelation, hell is described as a lake of fire into which the devil is finally thrown. But, the devil doesn’t have a body that can be harmed by fire, so the image of a lake of fire is also most likely a symbol of terrible destruction to the one cast into it. Getting back to our passage, those who worship the beast experience the natural effects of their sin like the torment of fire. The image of the rising smoke of the beast followers, is a direct contrast to the image of the rising incense smoke of the prayers of the saints that we read about in earlier chapters (5 and 8).

We didn’t read it today, but I’ll say just a bit about the final section of this chapter. It involves two harvests. Angels are called on to harvest the earth, or the “grain” of the earth. “The hour to reap has come...the earth is fully ripe.” In other words, the time is right. God’s timing is perfect. A second angel reaps the grapes. The first harvest most likely represents the gathering of the faithful into heaven. The second harvest represents judgement on the unfaithful and includes vivid images of blood flowing, a symbolic reminder of the seriousness of sin.

I’d like to end by coming back to verse 12 where we have a call for the endurance of those who follow Jesus. “Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord...they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.” As a Christian, I value my faith in God, and my assurance that I’m saved from sin through the grace of Jesus Christ. Because I believe in Jesus, I am now part of God’s kingdom. I believe this all to be true, but as I read Revelation, I see a bit different emphasis, and it challenges me. Revelation emphasises faithfulness over faith, endurance over assurance, and obedience over grace. We are challenged to not just sit back and say, “I’m going to heaven. I’m OK because I became a Christian.” If we truly believe, it will take the form of living a faithful life. The early Anabaptist/Mennonites emphasised “the obedience of faith.” Faith is shown in our actions. This could lead to difficulties, challenges, and even persecution. God calls us to endure because, even if the way doesn’t look hopeful, we can trust that God is in control, and will have the final victory. Let’s pray.

Almighty God, thank-you that through your Son Jesus we are part of your kingdom. We confess the times we’ve fallen into the temptation of following Babylon. Out of stress and fear, we’re tempted to push our understandings on others, to following the ways of the world, seeking our own recognition. We have not always loved others as you have loved us. Forgive us, we pray. Grant us the courage to let go of ourselves, to let go of our own comforts, to let go of our attempts to justify ourselves, and instead allow you to more fully lead us even if it means facing challenges. As we struggle with various difficulties, grant us the strength to faithfully endure. May we reflect your light to those around us, through Christ we pray, Amen.