

The Book Of Revelation

*3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy,
and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.
(Revelation 1:3. NRSV)*

*5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'
Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.'
(Revelation 21:5. NRSV)*

Message 10

Revelation 14:1- 20

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Introduction:

Good evening! Tonight we are concluding the fourth vision in the Book of Revelation which deals with the Devil and his henchmen. The story ends with a picture of the triumph of God's church. I'll begin reading and by God's grace we will divide the text as we go:

¹Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred *and* forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads.

There are a lot of tiny details in this one verse that we need to see in order to make good sense of the rest that follows. First of all we see the Lamb standing on Mount Zion. Mount Zion is used in many ways in the Bible, sometimes it refers to a literal mountain, or rather a region of high ground. Other times however it becomes a symbol of redemption such as in Joel 2:32:

And it shall come to pass *that* whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the remnant whom the Lord calls. (Joel 2:32. NKJV)

It is generally agreed that it is being used in this sense here. Mount Zion is a symbol for the Lord's redemption of an elect remnant. So who do we expect to see with him? The full number of the elect remnant and of course that is what we see. When we studied Revelation 7 we were told the number of the elect SEALED. Revelation 7:4

⁴And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred *and* forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel *were* sealed (Revelation 7:4. NKJV)

We agreed with the commentators that the number 144,000 was a symbol of the full people of God, Old Covenant and New. 12 x 12 x 1000. So the full number of God's elect were SEALED, set apart and IDENTIFIED in chapter 7. Then we have a description of all manner of bad things happening on the earth. We are told that the dragon has been trying to kill these people, we are told that he has henchmen who likewise try to kill these people and YET here they all are on Mount Zion. Not a single one has been lost. Those whom God seals, he delivers. That is the point. This is likely being further emphasised by the fact that whereas the dragon stood on the sand in 13:1 now the Lamb stands on the mountain. His is the sure foundation.

²And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. ³They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred *and* forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth.

Here we have what is often referred to as "The Song of the Redeemed". It is a new song because it reflects back on the newly completed work of redemption and it is sung by those who have experienced it. The full number of God's people, Old Covenant and New, sing the new song of what God has done throughout the ages to redeem for himself a people out of the earth. Now these redeemed people are described:

⁴These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from *among* men, *being* firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. ⁵And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.

Now again, here we have a clear example of a place where a woodenly literal interpretation produces theological gibberish. This cannot mean that the only saved people in eternity are virgins, for one thing that would mean that Peter, James and John and all the other disciples would be excluded, the Bible says they were married men. The Apostle Paul laments that of the Apostles only he and Barnabas travel about without a wife. Are we to assume that only Paul and Barnabas are in heaven? David is excluded? Moses? Abraham? No of course not. If we were to take this verse in a woodenly literal way, poor Abraham would be doubly excluded. He was married and he was a frequent liar! And yet elsewhere in the NT heaven is called "Abraham's Bosom". In addition there is a clue in the words that are used in the Greek. The phrase "not defiled with women" would be the typical way of speaking about sexual sin for men. But then it says: "for they are virgins" using the Greek word *parqenoi* (*parthenoi*) which literally means

“unmarried daughters”. So these people are described in both female terms and male terms. That alone should let us know we are dealing in symbol, it can’t be literal because it literally makes no grammatical sense! In English if I said: “She is my favourite brother” you would know I was speaking in some form of code. Meaning my brother is a bit feminine or my girlfriend is like a brother to me. I can’t mean it literally because it makes no literal sense. So here. Now if we also remember that much of the imagery in the Book of Revelation is borrowed from Old Testament canvases then we are very prepared to understand this as symbol. In the Old Testament virginity was regularly used of the whole people of God as a symbol for covenant allegiance and fidelity. As for example in 2 Kings 19:21:

²¹This *is* the word which the LORD has spoken concerning him: ‘The virgin, the daughter of Zion, has despised you, laughed you to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem has shaken *her* head behind your back! (2 Kings 19:21. NKJV)

In this passage “the virgin” meant the whole nation of Judah which in God’s judgment had not abandoned the covenant as had her sister Israel. Thus virgin meant “covenant allegiance”. So what we are to see in Revelation 14 is that the elect people of God are those who have not betrayed their allegiance to God by whoring about with the idols and passions of the world. This is incredibly common language in the OT. In fact whole books have been written about the imagery of whoredom and sexual betrayal as OT metaphors for lack of faith and constancy in our walk with the Lord. The message here is that the saved people of God are singular in their allegiance and steadfast in the truth. They have not believed the lies that the devil and his henchmen have been using to ensnare the unsaved who did not love the truth. Now most commentators agree that in this final chapter of the fourth vision we see the end first and then go back a bit just before the end. The vision of the elect in heaven is the end, chronologically speaking; now we rewind a little bit and see, as it were, the beginning of the end. It is displayed this way because it is meant as an encouragement to the saints to persevere. The vision says: “Look! See how well this ends! None are lost, all persevere, all are safe in the presence of God. Relax. Don’t be alarmed by what I am about to show you.” And then he shows them all hell breaking loose.

⁶Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—

⁷saying with a loud voice, “Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.”

There is some division among commentators as to how these verses are to be translated and understood. If this were a seminary level class we would deal with these difficulties at length but because they do not greatly affect the theology of the chapter we will not dwell on them in great detail. The trouble begins with the fact that this is the only use of the word “gospel” in Revelation and it is used without the definite article, meaning it may not be “the Gospel” it may just be a Gospel and we remember that the word gospel properly means announcement of generally good or true news so it is not clear whether we have an angel preaching THE GOSPEL or just making an important announcement about some eternal truths. Those who think that this is not “the Gospel” will point out that there is not much Gospel content provided in this message. No cross, no atonement, no resurrection, no Holy Spirit. Just fear God. That is hardly the Christian Gospel. Others say that what we have is obviously a short form summary; perhaps the angel preaches for 4 hours and we have just the title page as it were, fear God because bad things are about to go down. Parsing the language is pretty heavy work and as I said, I’m not sure it changes the meaning a great deal. The bottom line is that in the scene before the Second Coming, there is a last declaration of eternal truth, there is a last appeal for people to get right with God with no indication of positive response.

⁸And another angel followed, saying, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.”

Here is an example of how something is introduced rather abruptly and then not unpacked for a few chapters. This is somewhat common in Apocalyptic literature, it helps create drama and a sense of prophetic certainty. So here we meet for the first time in Revelation the concept of BABYLON. Fallen, fallen is the great city. The story of her fall will be told in detail in chapters 17-18 and we will look at that in two weeks. Commentators nearly all agree that Babylon here is a symbol of the world culture that stands in opposition to the way of God and that seeks to seduce men and women away from the path of life. We first meet Babylon in Genesis where instead of obeying God’s command to go forth, fill the earth and multiply, men and women decide to stay, not go forth and build a tower and make a name for themselves. Babylon then becomes the seductive alternative to living life God’s ways. In the time of John’s writing, Babylon was a near abandoned, dusty village in the middle of nowhere, but it had become a symbol of the world culture opposed to God. She seduces people to abandon the covenant with God and to commit adultery. So we have a contrast, the elect people of God are those who rejected the pull of culture and stayed true to God, everyone else is fallen, everyone else is seduced into death and ruin.

⁹Then a third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives *his* mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

We talked about this last week. There is an obvious back and forth in the Book of Revelation between the mark of the beast and the mark of the lamb. If you are sealed with the mark of the lamb then you must walk through the wrath of the beast. On the other hand if you are sealed with the mark of the beast then you must endure the wrath of the lamb. Everyone receives a mark and everyone faces wrath. So the clear choice that is being presented here is between the mark of the lamb and the mark of the beast. No option is presented that avoids wrath altogether. But the wrath of the beast is temporary, it is brief and it is doomed to failure. All who were sealed by the Holy Spirit are finally redeemed by the Lamb. Not one is lost. On other hand the wrath of the Lamb is unspeakably awful. It is eternal, it is everlasting and it is utterly devastating in its effect. This language of “full strength” or “uncut” wrath needs to be briefly unpacked also. Wine in those days was often “cut” or mixed with water to dilute it. Keep in mind that adults drank wine throughout the day because it helped to keep water parasites at bay and so you would be staggering drunk by the end of the day if you drank full strength wine from sun up to sun down. You would only drink uncut wine at the end of the day. This is a way of saying that all throughout human history, THE DAY, our experiences of God’s wrath and anger against sin are “CUT” they are mixed with grace. Even the vilest of sinners, even the most fallen cultures have never known uncut wrath. God mixes wrath with grace, he makes the rain to fall on sinners and righteous alike. But at the end of the day, at the close of history, those who have refused his gift of salvation are thrown down into hell where they will face his wrath in a full strength, unmixed kind of way. There will not be a trace of mercy or grace in hell. That is a terrible, heart breaking reality. Such a person will be tormented with fire and sulphur or fire and brimstone. The Greek word here for torment is *basanischsetai* (*basanistheisetai*) and it literally means he shall be tortured. That it happens before the face of the Lamb and the Holy Angels means that hell does not exist outside of God’s realm, it is ultimately under his reign and is an extension of his Sovereignty. At the end of the day, the devil is an agent only. God is the God of Hell. Anyone who would say that Jesus is only love and only mercy must cut this verse out of their Bible. Jesus is Sovereign for eternity over those being tormented in hell. It does not happen in shadow. Jesus sees it all and is Sovereign over all. He could end it with a word. He does not.

And of those so condemned we are told:

¹¹And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

This is frequently called the most awful verse in Scripture. It says that the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever and that those undergoing torment have no rest day or night. There is an on-goingness to hell that cannot be denied. Many commentators see a similarity in the imagery here with that found in Isaiah 66 where it says:

²³And it shall come to pass *that* from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the LORD. ²⁴“And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” (Isaiah 66:23-24. NKJV)

These two passages both seem to speak of eternal punishment in an on-going sense but also in something of a diminishing sense. Let me very carefully unpack this. I have got in trouble with Evangelical Christians in the past on this because in my experience Evangelical Christians are rightly famous for too often wanting simple answers for complex questions. They want all their truths to be fortune cookie sized. If you can't fit it on a T-shirt, they don't want to hear it. So if you try and talk with some delicacy and some specificity you can find yourself on the wrong side of the Evangelical mob. Nevertheless, I think this is serious enough to warrant some care. Hell is going to be a battle ground for Christians in the next decade. Loads of Evangelicals are prepared to throw it out all together as being simply too awful to fit into any theological package that includes gentle Jesus meek and mild. So loads of Christians are following Rob Bell in suggesting that hell is either just a metaphor or just a way station, a place we pass through briefly on our way to heaven. No one STAYS in hell for ever, they would argue. In order to combat that, in sadly typical fashion many Evangelicals will go too far the other way and make hell as awful as they can as a sort of macho display of rigorous truth telling. These are the sorts of nonsensical dynamics that make us look stupid and inconsistent to the watching world. So let's just slow down and build our theology off of our best reading of the text. Let's begin by stating some things that these texts appear to be stating:

1. Hell is everlasting.

Hell itself appears to go on and on and on and on. It is not a weekend bonfire that burns itself out after some time, hell is an eternal flame.

2. A condemned person's existence is also on-going.

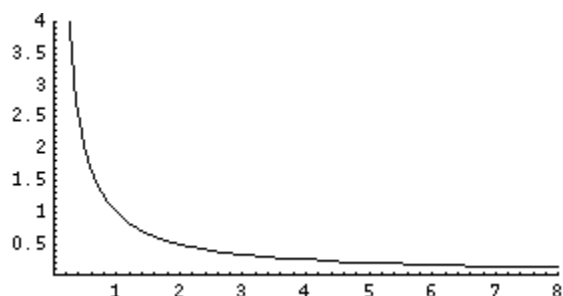
Because of course it is possible, just conceptually speaking, that hell could be everlasting but a soul's experience of it could be quite short. For example, there is an eternal flame outside the Parliament buildings in Ottawa but if you threw a piece of paper on the eternal flame that paper would burn up and cease to exist within seconds. The flame is eternal the paper's experience of it is quite brief. Is that what's going on here? No. It says that there is no rest for them and that the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. So we reject what is called annihilationism.

People do not "die" in hell. Hell is forever and the soul condemned is there forever. However the language also seems to suggest that:

3. The soul's consciousness appears to be ever diminishing though never extinguished

It doesn't for example say that the screams of their anguish arise forever and ever. It says the smoke of their torment arises and it says their worm does not die. You see one of the reasons theologians are loathe to speak of "the immortality of the soul" is that one wants to qualify what one means by that because it means different things to different people. Some Greek philosophers said that souls are like energy and cannot be destroyed. They exist perpetually. But the Bible doesn't quite talk that way. It says that saved souls have everlasting life but it could never speak of hell as being a form of everlasting life, rather it seems to speak of it as everlasting dying. Not death per se, not the cessation of consciousness. They are in torment forever, but an everlasting DYING. This is why I have been hesitant to go about repeating ad nauseam the t-shirt slogans that serve to mark one as thoroughly conservative and Evangelical. The words "eternal conscious punishment" are in some fundamentalist camps the equivalent of the secret password identifying you as a true believer. Listen I believe in eternal conscious punishment, I just want to say a few words about the diminishing nature of that consciousness if I may. It is possible and it seems to me to be the best reading of the text to speak of a diminishing and asymptotic consciousness. Do you remember asymptotes from High School algebra? In mathematics there are equations that produce lines that draw ever nearing but never intersecting with an axis. (see below)

$y=1/x$:



In this sort of equation the line will continue to approach the x axis for eternity without ever crossing it. It will never have a value of 0 on the vertical axis. I think this is a helpful analogy for diminishing yet never extinguishing consciousness. Hell is eternal dying. The soul is never dead, never extinguished but experiences on-going dying as it is separated from all that makes for life. I think that makes the best sense of the language, that makes sense with “their worm will not die” and the “smoke of their torment” arises. That sounds like diminished consciousness but not the cessation of conscious torment and restlessness. In science you are always looking for the theory that has the broadest explanatory force, meaning that it explains the most of the data that you observe in a data set. This is the explanation, in my mind, that deals the best with all of the language. It agrees that hell the place is everlasting, that is the horizontal x axis. It agrees that consciousness is everlasting, that is the diminishing arc. But it makes sense of the language of worm and diminishment that the coffee cup and t-shirt slogans fail to deal with. This makes it the superior theory, in my mind.

However, regardless of how you define everlasting conscious torment, it is an unspeakably horrible outcome for those who have rejected God’s grace. It is, as many have said, the most awful truth in Scripture, regardless of how precisely that truth is articulated.

¹²Here is the patience of the saints; here *are* those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

This picture of the end and the final states of things is given, we are told to inspire the perseverance of the Saints. You have to have faced some persecution I suppose to understand how an awful description of hell is helpful in developing perseverance in your faith, but in the early church it was not uncommon for Christians to be tortured to death. They knew that to deny Jesus before men was to invite him to deny you before the Father so the issue of how to hold onto faith during torture was pretty important. And if you knew that failure to persevere under human torture meant having to go through an unending eternity of torture in hell, you would be far more inclined to hold on and to persevere. Torture in this life is mixed and it is momentary. Torture in the next is unmixed and unending. Here is the perseverance of the saints.

¹³Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: 'Blessed *are* the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them."

John is told to write a beatitude: blessed are the dead who die in the Lord for they shall rest from their labours and their works shall follow them. Here we have the positive counterpart to the vision of everlasting torment. You should persevere in faith, even under torture not just because hell is a lot worse than what you may face here, but because heaven is a lot better. If you die under human torture you will go to heaven and rest and then at the final judgment you will experience reward because your good works will be remembered and counted. With that we move to the last scene of the human story on earth, the Second Coming and the harvest of the earth.

¹⁴Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and on the cloud sat *One* like the Son of Man, having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle.

Theologians and linguists disagree with each other here also. There is a great debate as to whether this "one like the Son of Man" is in fact "the Son of Man". The NKJV translators thought so and that is why you have the capitalized pronouns. However, a slight majority of scholars today would disagree. They see this as a high level angel. Part of the shift in opinion is due to the expanded study given to extra-Biblical apocalyptic literature and what we have discovered is that it is actually quite common to refer to angels this way in that genre. We didn't know that 30 years ago. So the balance now a days tips toward understanding all of these as angels. That, by the way, means that 7 angels participate in the last scene of vision four and that

makes scholars happy because 7 is also very common in Apocalyptic literature. If this fellow on the cloud is Jesus, then there are only 6 angels. Another reason a slight majority of scholars favour this interpretation is that the other angels seem to be giving orders to this character and that would be odd if it were Jesus. I've heard both arguments and I'm not really sure which interpretation is better and it doesn't really matter because agent and author are so often overlapping in the Bible. God is the author of all things but generally does all things through agency, so Jesus can be said to be the author of this harvest and whether he is also the agent is therefore less important to me. But anyway, I like to tell you when there is a lack of consensus. The point we can state with more clarity is that it seems we are seeing a harvest of the earth in two acts. First there is the removal of the first fruits, which are generally understood as the believers, then there is the casting of the vine into the winepress where it is trodden down which is generally understood as a picture of an end time cataclysm that wipes the whole earth clean of fallen human kind. With that interpretation in mind, we will keep reading the text:

¹⁵And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, "Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe."

¹⁶So He who sat on the cloud thrust in His sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.

This then completes the first act of the harvest. Verse 17 begins the second act:

¹⁷Then another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, he also having a sharp sickle.

¹⁸And another angel came out from the altar, who had power over fire, and he cried with a loud cry to him who had the sharp sickle, saying, "Thrust in your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for her grapes are fully ripe."

That this angel is connected with the fire from the altar is understood generally to mean that the final outpouring of wrath upon the earth is in the final analysis the ultimate answer to all the prayers offered by the saints during the time of tribulation. God does hear our prayers for deliverance and he does respond with justice. This cataclysm comes forth from the chamber of prayers.

¹⁹So the angel thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, and threw *it* into the great winepress of the wrath of God. ²⁰And the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress, up to the horses' bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs. (Revelation 14:1-20. NKJV)

The picture that emerges from this final scene is of God selecting his first fruit, his choice offering from the earth and consigning the rest to the fire. In the Old Testament the first fruits were brought to the temple for God and the remainder of the harvest was given over to the

people. Here that imagery is turned and God takes the best portion of the humanity – the redeemed elect, and gives the rotten rest over to the devil. The 1600 stadia is an obvious symbol in the same way that the 144000 was. 4 in Biblical literature is the number of the earth in its totality. 4 is also the number of the universe so we have $4 \times 4 \times 1000$ which is to say that the wrath of God falls upon the **WHOLE CREATED REALM** leaving nothing untouched. Everything outside the city, that is everything outside God's election is destroyed by fire. The imagery of blood to the horse's bridle is taken from 1 Enoch 100:3 "the horse shall walk through the blood of sinners up to his chest". Again, it is a symbolic way of saying that all of mankind opposed to God will be finally and utterly submerged in the unmixed wrath of God.

Let's end there and we can take some questions.