

Sermon 46: Revelation 14:14-15:4: The Final Harvest

OUTLINE

The wheat
The grapes

INTRODUCTION

In the secular mind, the mind that views the present state of things and extrapolates both backwards and forwards to try and see the past and the future, and then hypothesize on how things were and will, has a very different view of the end than the Bible. Those who do not believe in God and the story line of the bible foresee the universe winding down over millions and billions of years and all things grinding to a halt in a big freeze as all the stars lose their heat. The Bible has a very different view of the end which results in one of two emotions, hope or terror. At least these are the right emotions to feel if you are thinking correctly. Time will not endlessly march on as it has supposedly done without any interference. God is going to break into time; He is going to force a conclusion, there is going to be a reckoning and a rescue. Heaven or hell, judgement or reward, these are the certainties of the future not eternal humdrum with no final justice. Hope is the attitude of the Christian, at least it should be if he is thinking correctly. And, terror should be the portion of the unbeliever if he realised what awaits those who do not turn to Christ in faith and repentance. That inward desire for justice will finally be satisfied and all evil receive its just rewards, and all those desires for happiness and that 'happily ever after,' will be satisfied in eternal fellowship with God.

God's ending of history has often been spoken of as a harvest, as we come to the end of this cycle, the end of history is portrayed as a double harvest. There is the harvest of wheat, which represents the church, and there is the harvest of grapes which represents the unbeliever. Our look into these verses will reinforce the message that has been rung over and over again in this book. The believer must endure because of his certain hope; the unbeliever must flee the wrath to come by faith and repentance.

The wheat

V14 gives us a picture of Christ, '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.' These words remind us of Mark 14:62, 'And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.'" The reference is of course going back to Daniel 7:13. The golden crown represents His present authority and victory and the sickle speaks of the pending action of harvesting. The Christ of the gospels was a planter and a sower, this vision is portraying Christ as the harvester. Time will not be left to run its course, but God is awaiting a particular time and will then end time as we know it.

V15, '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.'" The drama of the moment unfolds with an angel coming from the temple, probably indicating that his message is directly from God, and we get to hear the issuing of the order for the final harvest to commence. The notion of a final harvest follows on the heels of the martyrs who were called the 'firstfruits' 14:4. The language of 'fully ripe' and the extent being the whole earth speaks of a final act. The word used for 'ripe' is a word used to describe when wheat is dry and ready for reaping indicating a wheat harvest.

V16, 'So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.' The Son as God's regent over earth executes God's order to reap. The question that faces us is this one: why do we have two harvests? Some will argue that they are describing the same event in two ways indicating a judgement on the wicked being mentioned twice. Some would see a pre-trib and post-trib rapture. I am of the opinion that these two harvests indicate God's final dealings with the two groups into which all people fall, believers or unbelievers. In the first harvest of wheat there is no mention of judgement but in the second of grapes there is. This leads me to conclude that this wheat harvest indicates God's promise to gather His wheat into barns at the end of history, Matt. 3:12, but will burn the chaff. Technically speaking when Jesus returns to earth for judgement, there will be the trumpet call and all of the saints will either be resurrected or instantly glorified before the day of judgement. As the bible describes it, our harvesting which will consist of receiving our resurrection bodies will precede the judgement. So technically the harvest to life precedes the harvest to death.

The grapes

V17-18, 'Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 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.'" Where Christ is portrayed as being personally involved in harvesting His people, an angel is agent of harvesting the unbelievers. Angels as instruments in the judgement was also the teaching of Christ, Matt. 13:41-42, 'The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, 42 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' But notice that another angel comes from the altar, the one who has authority over the fire of the altar and he orders the harvest of the unbeliever. What is the significance of the angel coming from the altar? This is the altar mentioned in 6:9-10, 'When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" This is also the altar where the saints prayers are offered, 8:3, 'And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne.' It is this angel, who is associated with the martyrs and their prayers and cries for justice, it is this angel who represents vindicating

God's people and settling the debts of their persecution who enacts God's vengeance in payment of all that was done against God's people. God encourages His people to peace by reminding them that delayed justice is the reality. Evil can prosper today but justice will finally be done.

V19, '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.' The enactment of God's wrath is portrayed by the picture of a winepress. A winepress was a large vat where you would trample the grapes underfoot. This is a common picture for judgement in the scriptures, Joel 3:12-13, 'Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great.' Isaiah 63:1-4, 'Who is this who comes from Edom,

in crimsoned garments from Bozrah,
he who is splendid in his apparel,
marching in the greatness of his strength?

"It is I, speaking in righteousness,
mighty to save."

² Why is your apparel red,
and your garments like his who treads in the winepress?

³ "I have trodden the winepress alone,
and from the peoples no one was with me;
I trod them in my anger
and trampled them in my wrath;
their lifeblood spattered on my garments,
and stained all my apparel.

⁴ For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and my year of redemption had come.

The irony in this judgement is that those who trampled the temple of God, the church underfoot are themselves trampled.

V20, '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.' When John reports that the winepress is outside the city, this does not indicate that we are at literal Jerusalem. There is a theological significance to 'outside the city.' We see in Rev. 22:14-15 that those who wash their robes in the blood of the lamb may enter the city as clean but outside the New Jerusalem are the sinners. In the OT the sin offering was burned outside the city as well as all the cities rubbish, but most importantly when Jesus died as a criminal, he was killed outside the city to indicate His disfellowship that we might know fellowship. He was put under the wrath and judgement of God that we might be able to be sons. Those who refuse to accept Jesus death as their substitute will themselves have to undergo eternal rejection. This is not a literal picture but a symbol of mass carnage. The number 1600 has also been thought to be symbolic, 40 times 40. The flood was for 40 days and nights, Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years until the sinners of that generation died, 40 has often been thought to be a number related to judgement. The massive carnage is indicated in a river

of blood flowing from God's winepress. A river 160 miles long and as deep as a horse's bridle is a significant picture of collective death. The casualties of that final battle will be the greatest of any battle.

Our window into the end of history closes with the people of God singing. In 15:1 we have an overlapping beginning for the 7 bowls and the end of this cycle. Why would we have another round of judgements after the final harvest has been described? It appears that although God loves to tell us how things end, and we are assured in these visions of ch. 14 that all will end well for the church and with judgement for the lost, there still remains an explanation of what happens to the beasts, dragon and Babylon. Once again the book of Revelation is bad when it comes to following the rules for a good plot, because it gives so many spoilers and keeps rushing to the happy ending before the battles have been fought, but it is also good comfort, and this is the purpose of the book.

The final scene feels like Israel would have felt after the Red Sea had drowned Pharaoh's armies. We know that they sang a new song of deliverance. This notion is strengthened as we see that they sing the song of the Lamb and of Moses. This is the combined people of God from old and new testaments singing a final victory song. We see the water on fire indicating judgement and the words of their song are a series of familiar quotes from the OT. The overall tone of the worship is a celebration of God's justice, which is a reminder that when the devil and those who followed him are finally judged, we will not delight in their pain, but we will worship God's justice and agree with it.

When God wants to give His people fuel to face death, to say no to temptation and to continue to apply themselves when they feel like they want to give up, this is the picture He repeatedly paints for them. One day we will all be free from sin and every enemy and in the direct presence of God praising Him. That is the happy goal that makes it all worth it, let this be your happy thought, for it is real, inevitable and enough.