

## **Revelation 14:14-20**

### **God: On Judgement Day**

#### **Whose Blood?**

We've come to the end of our current series in Revelation, but by no means have we reached the end of the book. So this point is a pause in our journey, and what a good thing it is only that because the sight before our eyes is a huge sea of blood. There always seems to be quite a lot of blood in Revelation - the word appears 17 times - but whose blood is it? Sometimes it's the blood of the Lamb or Jesus, (1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11); sometimes it's the blood of the saints or martyrs, (6:10; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24;19:2); sometimes it's a symbol of death and judgement, so that waters turn to blood or blood falls from the sky, (6:12; 8:7; 11:6; 16:3); And sometimes it's not quite clear.

The section we're looking at today is one of the most unclear parts of the whole book, but - and especially in a book like Revelation - when a passage seems unclear, it often simply means that it points to several things at the same time. Nevertheless, I've spent a good bit of time this week poring over some dozen commentaries, all giving arguments as to why their particular choice of understanding is to be preferred.

#### **Issues in Revelation 14:14-20**

Here are just a few of the issues: Is the person seated on the white cloud (v.14) Jesus or an angel? Do the two harvests relate to the same event or different events? Is the city in v.20 Babylon or Jerusalem? Whose blood flows from the winepress? (v.20) And how does this relate to other parts of the book?

Maybe we don't always have to choose between these options. Sometimes, as we'll see, an image can have more than one reference point at the same time - and the meaning is enriched by the tension between them. But first of all, let's once again familiarise ourselves with the context of the passage in terms of what's gone before.

#### **Context**

In Chapter 12 we heard about the Dragon who is committed to destroying everything good about God's creation. In Chapter 13 we discovered this Dragon operates through Beasts, which themselves cruelly employ methods of control and locking people into their worship. At the

beginning of Chapter 14 we saw the Lamb standing with his people, the 144,000, who we remember from Chapter 7 had washed their robes and made them white in his blood. In the middle of Chapter 14 we heard about God's judgement on those who follow the beast, their drinking of the wine of his wrath, and their torment in the presence of the Lamb. Then we come to the last section of Chapter 14, which describes a harvest of crops which have fully ripened. That's the context - what about the content?

## Content

The section begins with the words "**And I looked, and behold...**" So clearly there's a connection between what John has *just seen* and what he's *about to see*. So as I've said frequently during this series of sermons, it's not that this is the next item in an End Times programme of events, but rather that this is the next vision John has, and it's linked to what he previously saw in some way - possibly amplifying it, possibly explaining it, almost certainly adding further layers of depth and perspective.

## One on a white cloud...

John sees "**a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one "like a son of man," with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand.**" (14:14) Immediately our thoughts go to Jesus, the Son of Man, but it's more likely that this is simply an angel, and the phrase "like a son of man" simply means "in human form". The whole chapter from v.6 onwards describes several angels - seven including this one - while Jesus is referred to consistently as the *Lamb*, and in the very next verse we read, "**Then another angel**" - implying that this was the nature of the one just coming before. Nevertheless, the fact that this angel is "like a son of man" and "on a cloud" is a visual clue that judgement is in the air, because in the Book of Daniel and on the lips of Jesus the Son of Man coming with clouds (in the plural) is always associated with judgement. Maybe John remembered Jesus' words preserved in Matthew 13, about angels being sent out at the end of the age, by the Son of Man, as his harvesters - separating the wicked from the righteous.

## The Double Harvest

We then have a double harvest - firstly of grain, and secondly of grapes. Do these two harvests refer to *different* things, or *the same* thing, or, as I believe, *different things united* by a common thread?

Commentators who say these are two parallel pictures of the same event look at their commonality, and see a possible background in the prophet Joel 3:13: **“Swing the sickle for the harvest is ripe; trample the grapes for the winepress is full... So great is their wickedness.”** In Joel, both harvest images refer to the same event of God’s judgement.

Others, however, point to *differences* between the two pictures: in particular that although the grape harvest goes on to describe the *trampling*, the wheat harvest *doesn’t* go on to describe the threshing. Both trampling of the grape and threshing of the wheat are Biblical images of judgement, So why is the threshing not mentioned here in Revelation 14 - if they’re meant to be parallel images of the same judgement event?.

Many commentators say the first - or wheat - harvest is the gathering of those who belong to Christ; whereas the second - or grape - harvest is the judgement on those who don’t accept him. Jesus certainly spoke of the End of the Age in terms of a harvest. In Mark’s gospel he described the Kingdom of God as a growing seed, saying, **“As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”** (Mk 4:29) But there’s another reason to believe that wheat harvest is the gathering of God’s people, and we see this when we look again and the *context* of this passage:

In Chapter 14 v.4 the 144,000 are described as **“firstfruits offered to God”** - in other words, they’re clearly associated with the Harvest. Later on, in vv.9-11, those who follow the Beast drink the cup of God’s wrath. (14:9-11) So there’s a two fold pattern earlier in the chapter which finds its correspondence with a two-fold pattern at the end. That might all have seemed a bit technical, but we’ll see later how, even though the two pictures are about different aspects of the end, nevertheless they still come together in the Cross. I want to think a bit now about the second picture - extremely gruesome and much more detailed.

### **The Grape Harvest - a Closer Look**

As with the first harvest, the cutting of the grapes is done by two angels, the second one of which, we read, **“had charge of the fire and came from the altar.”** (v.18) Immediately we’re thinking back to the burning incense, which in chapter 6 represented the prayers of the saints rising up from beneath the altar. Somehow this vision will be connected to the cry for justice, but will it give the answer in the way we expect - vengeance on God’s enemies? One thing we’ve come to learn with Revelation is to expect the unexpected.

The picture us cerrytainly about judgement. In biblical times, grape juice was often referred to as the blood of the grape, and trampling grapes had already been used as an image of judgement in Isaiah 63. It’ll appear again in Revelation 19, but here in Chapter 14 there are some curious details we need to look at.

## **Blood that Covers the whole Earth**

First of all there's the huge quantity of blood. We read, "**blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as horses bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.**" (v.20) Does anyone know how long 1600 Stadia is? It's a huge area. 1600 stadia is actually about the entire length of the Holy Land, but probably John picks this number for its symbolic value. Clearly it's not an exact geographical measurement but it sounds like another of those special numbers we're used to in Revelation. We've already seen how the number four tends to signify the whole world; squaring a number emphasises totalality - total coverage of the earth; and adding noughts on the end is John's way of emphasizing simple vastness - a bit like the 144,000 is twelve squared with noughts. So this blood, which speaks of the wrath and judgement of God, covers the whole of the land, or the whole earth. But whose blood can it be speaking of?

## **Outside the City**

The second detail is that the grapes were trampled in the winepress "**outside the city.**" The name of the city isn't mentioned here so John expects us to identify the location without him telling us. Many cities are named in Revelation, but he uses the phrase "the city" in only two other places: Chapters 21 and 22 with reference to the holy city, and in Chapter 11, with reference to a city in rebellion against God. John speaks of "**the city**" in a way that assumes the reader's already come across it, which takes us *back* to Revelation 11, and here we learn of two faithful witnesses martyred and says, "**Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.**" (11:8) Once again the language is highly symbolic, yet suddenly John introduces a fact of *actual history*: the crucifixion of Jesus outside Jerusalem: it's a mixture of symbolic Babylon with historic Jerusalem.

Let's return to Revelation 14: the trampling takes place in the vineyard *outside the city*. We know from other New Testament writers that this fact was seen as particularly significant. Writing to "the Hebrews", who were probably a congregation in Rome, the anonymous author says at the end, "**The High Priest carries the blood of the animals into the most holy place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us then go to him, outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.**" (Heb 13:11-13)

Could it be that this image of God's judgement - the grapes being trampled in the wine press - is actually therefore a picture of his wrath falling on Jesus - the Lamb of God - whose blood then flows to cover the whole earth? It's more than possible. John Sweet, who was one of my theological tutors says tantalisingly in his commentary on Revelation: "*In the light of 5:5*" (the vision of the Lion and Lamb) "*can John be simply echoing the Old Testament? Can Christ finally*

*conquer in the manner of the beast?"* (p.232) Later, commenting on the winepress image of Chapter 19 he gives the answer: *"It is the cross now, not as the world's judgement on Jesus, but Jesus' judgement on the world: his eyes like a flame of fire pierce those who pierced him."* (p.282)

### **The Cross - Key to both Harvests**

So let's now look backward through the chapter, and ask firstly, whether the Cross can be that connecting theme between the two harvests, and then finally to ask, how does the winepress as an image of the cross relate to the pictures of judgement we saw last week, which occur earlier in Chapter 14.

So firstly, and briefly, could the image of the wheat harvest also, in some way refer to the cross? We would expect it to and I think it does. In John's Gospel - almost certainly not written by the same author as Revelation, but probably known to him - Jesus says in prediction of the cross: **"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single seed. But if it dies it produces many seeds."** (John 12:23-24) St Paul also spoke of Jesus raised from death as **"the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."** In other words this combining of the harvest of God's Kingdom coming explicitly through Jesus' death was well known when the New Testament was being written.

Now, earlier in this sermon I made the point that somehow John's vision of the harvests was linked to what went before - linked by the words **"And I looked, and behold..."** Often when John does this, what he sees explains or interprets the vision he has previously set before us. I think that's exactly what's going on here. In v.3 we saw the **"144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth."** How did their redemption happen? It happened through the Cross - the self-offering of the Lamb they now follow - who gave himself to death as a seed so that a whole **"harvest of the earth"** (v.15) could be reaped. But how about **"the earth's vine"**? (v.18) In vv.9-11 we have those who followed the beast, **"drink the wine of God's fury which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath, ... tormented... in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb."** How does this relate to the Cross and the winepress?

### **The Winepress and the Wine**

The answer is in the form of a question: *"How did God make the wine of his fury which could be so potent at full strength?"* That's a question left at the end of the middle section of Chapter 14, and it's answered in the third section: he made the wine when the grapes were trampled outside the city. He made the wine when Jesus bore the full strength of his wrath on the cross. He made the wine and it flowed across the whole earth. In John 15 Jesus says, **"I am the true vine"** and here in Revelation 14 he's referred to as **"the vine of the earth."**

Those who accept him, washing their robes clean in his blood, are redeemed. Those who reject him, when they come before God, are shown the full significance of Jesus' death - except now it's too late and the blood remains as a judgement rather than redemption. Again we find an intriguing half parallel in the writings of Paul with reference to the communion service: **“anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself.”** (1 Cor.11:29) And so, those who followed the beast in its judgement on Christ are made to drink the cup of God's wrath. Yet for them it signals no redemption, but remains as an everlasting torture.

### **Everlasting Torture?**

Can we believe in everlasting torture? As we've gone through this book of Revelation, I've found it something of a journey - even from one sermon to the next. Last week I suggested quite strongly that the torment of those who fall under the judgement of God does *not* last for ever and ever in reality - and that the image of the smoke going up for ever and ever is merely a metaphor of the everlasting symbolism of justice done. This week I'm wondering about changing my mind.

If the picture of the winepress refers directly to God's judgement on the beast and its followers in the Old Testament sense, then I would be strongly confirmed in last week's conclusion, because in this image of the winepress, the life blood is completely trampled out of the grapes - in other words they completely die. So it seems to me that if the beast and its followers are in the winepress then punishment is definitely not eternal but rather finite - ending in complete death. But if Christ is in the wine press, he did completely die - once for the whole world upon the cross - and his wounds in the joint images of the bloody Lamb and the cup of God's wine - are on display for eternity.

The idea of Jesus supervising the torture of his enemies is hard to swallow - as I said last week - but the idea of those who reject Christ being eternally tormented by seeing the true redemptive power of his wounds yet unable to access that redemption is all too possible. Then, the picture of them having **“no rest day nor night”** becomes more of a reality.

Craig Keener, who wrote one of my commentaries on Revelation, completed his words on Chapter 14 in the following way: *“A young atheist chose to consider the claims of Christ immediately rather than deferring the decision because the doctrine of hell made the stakes too high to ignore. Twenty-four years later that former atheist remains a committed Christian - and is writing this commentary.”* (Revelation p.382) It's not Jesus who tortures anyone, just as God does not trample his victims in the way that our unconverted desires might want him to. But God takes the trampling and wrath into his own being on the cross. For some it will stand in eternal judgement over them; for others it's way to life.