

This morning our text is three chapters long – Revelation 14-16. I'm covering that much in one sermon because there is a lot of thematic repetition in the book of Revelation. Chapters 14-16 cover variations on themes that we have already covered in significant detail so we are going to skim over them and dip down here and there to give a little more attention to certain details that we haven't seen before or that are particularly memorable or edifying.

Now in the last two chapters, chapters 12 and 13, there has been a lot about the persecution of the saints. In chapter 12 a great dragon which symbolizes the devil goes after the saints and in chapter 13 the two beasts which symbolize godless humanity also makes war on the saints. Clearly one of the realities of being a Christian in this world is that the devil and his human followers are opposed to us and are inclined to persecute us or try to convince us in other ways to turn away from God and join them in their rebellion against God. To be a Christian is to be under attack in one way or another from Satan and his demons and his human followers. It is hard to be under attack all the time and so the book of Revelation has lots of encouragements for Christians to endure, to stand fast, and to live in hope.

So after two chapters that describe how our enemies are seeking to defeat us, chapter 14 begins by giving us a glimpse of the future blessedness of the followers of God. The first 5 verses of chapter 14 are a symbolic glimpse at the saints of God after their struggles in this life are over. John sees the Lamb, who is Jesus. He is standing on Mount Zion, which is a symbol for the heavenly Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God in the midst of his people. And with the Lamb are 144,000 people. That number stands for the fullness of the people of God. That is how we know that this is a picture of the final state. All of the followers of Jesus are there in the presence of Jesus and in the presence of God. They have Jesus' Father's name written on their foreheads. That is the counterpart to the mark of the beast.

And they are singing. They are worshipping. They are joyful. They are safe. What they are singing can only be learned by those who have been saved. That, of course, is not different than the here and now in that it takes supernatural grace to be able to see the glory of God and truly understand the songs that we sing.

They are described as being pure. The language is of sexual purity, but that is symbolic for comprehensive purity. They have been cleansed of their sins. They are holy and pure in the presence of God. They are referred to as the firstfruits of God. In this context firstfruits refers to the entire people of God. Later on in the chapter we will read about another part of the harvest which has to do with God's judgment on the wicked and so here the saints as the firstfruits are the part of the harvest of humanity that has been redeemed and offered to God.

These verses are an encouragement for the saints still struggling on earth. This is your destiny if you remain faithful to God in the struggles of this life. This is a very common perspective in the Bible. We are strengthened in the struggles of the present by promises of a glorious future. Here is one way to visualize that future. This does not mean that the final state will be one unending worship services. We're going to live on a

renewed earth and there will be lots of things to do. But it will all be offered to God in worship. We will finally glorify God in every part of our lives and there is going to be a lot of singing of praises to God.

Next we have a section which describes three different angels with messages for the people on earth. So we are moving back and forth through time. We have just been thinking about the final state, but then we are brought back to the present time. Three angels with their messages. The messages are all the gospel message which is about the way of salvation, but also includes warnings of judgment upon those who refuse to turn to God. The emphasis in these verses is on warning, but implied in them is the offer of salvation for anyone who would repent. These angels with their messages are part of the unseen world. We know that in the plan of God it is the church who has been called to bring the message of salvation and judgment to the world. These angels here may represent the supernatural help that the church receives in bringing God's message to the world.

In any case this is one of the realities of the spiritual warfare that the book of Revelation describes. There are lots of warnings. Those who continue to resist God do so by rejecting warnings of what will happen to them if they do not repent. Through the warnings God is giving people the opportunity to repent.

Verse 12 of chapter 14 is another call for the saints to endure. "Here is a call for endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus." The warnings of God's temporal and eternal judgments upon the unrepentant, are also relevant for God's people. They are sounded in our hearing as we engage the spiritual warfare that is the Christian life. There are all kinds of encouragements to draw us towards the life of enduring faithfulness. But there are also the warnings of God's judgment upon the unrepentant. Those warnings are directed to others if we are walking faithfully with Jesus, but they are also there for us as part of God's message that is there to help us to continue to endure. Both the promises and the warnings are there to help us to endure in the Christian life.

Next we have a precious promise in verse 13. "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!'" This is a memorable saying that has comforted the people of God through out the ages. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...."

Physical death is still a reality for the people of God. We know that we will one day die, unless the Lord returns before that day, and we are constantly losing loved ones. We are all familiar with funerals. And funerals are sad. Thinking about the fact that we must die is sad as well. There is a sadness that is part of living because of the reality of death.

But there is real comfort in the face of death in the gospel and this is one of the most precious expressions of that comfort. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." To be blessed is true wellbeing rooted in God's favor. There is no true wellbeing apart from a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That is

expressed here by referring to the dead saints as those who die in the Lord. Those who are united to Christ by faith are blessed when they die. Those who die in the Lord experience the ultimate wellbeing.

That is the ultimate comfort. Any comfort that does not include blessedness after death is a very small comfort. Unbelievers comfort themselves in all kinds of ways in the face of the reality of death, but the comfort of the Christian message for believers in Jesus is of a higher order altogether. Those who die in the Lord are blessed. They are truly better off than they were before their death. That is an incredible comfort when we lose loved ones who die in the Lord and it is an incredible comfort as we consider the fact that every day that passes brings us closer to death.

Two aspects of that blessedness are mentioned. Those who die in the Lord “rest from their labors” and “their deeds follow them.” Those who die in the Lord “rest from their labors.” This rest is not the rest of inactivity, but the rest of perfect peace and joy and satisfaction in relationship with God. In Matthew 11 Jesus promises to give rest for those who come to him. The promise is addressed to those who labor and are heavy laden. Because of sin, our work can be difficult and frustrating, we are weighed down with the guilt of sin, and we experience pain and sorrow and burdens. We are helped in all of these areas in this life through the rest that Jesus gives to his people, but we will experience that rest in its fullness after this life when we experience the fullness of our salvation. Those who die in the Lord rest from their labors.

Also “their deeds follow them.” How we live in the here and now will matter in the final state. In Matthew 6 Jesus tells us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven. This is part of the biblical teaching about rewards. We will be rewarded in heaven for our good deeds. This does not mean that we earn our way into heaven, but it does mean that the good deeds that we do as sinners saved by grace will be rewarded in the final state. And in that sense our deeds follow us when we die in the Lord. According to Jesus, his followers should rejoice when they are persecuted because of the reward they will receive. Being faithful in persecution leads to great reward. Luke 6:23, “Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven....”

So there is this great encouragement for believers in the middle of the book of Revelation which has so much to say about the difficulties Christians face in this life. “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord ... they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

The last part of Revelation 14, verses 14-20 are a symbolic description of the second coming. The second coming is described as a harvest. Jesus is described as “one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand.” An angel comes to him, presumably with a message from God the Father, and tells him “Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.” And then we read, “So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.”

Then we read of another angel commanding an angel with a sharp sickle, “Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” The angel with the sickle swung his sickle, gathered the grape harvest and “threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.” There is some ambiguity here as to who does what, but there is no question that the command to harvest comes from the throne of God and that Jesus is presiding over it. Clearly angels are involved.

There are two parts of the harvest. And while it is not explicit, it is likely that the first part refers to the harvest of the followers of Jesus. The second part of the harvest clearly refers to the harvest of the wicked. This imagery closely follows John the Baptist’s introduction of Jesus in Luke 3:17, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” The imagery is a little different, but the message is the same.

So the human race is pictured as a crop that will one day be harvested. There comes a time when the harvest is ripe and then the reaping will take place. The followers of Jesus will be harvested into the presence of God. The wicked will be harvested into the winepress of the wrath of God. The fact that there are only two final destinies for human beings is a theme that runs through the whole Bible and the imagery of these verses of a sickle swinging across the earth to reap the final harvest is memorable symbolic picture that powerfully conveys the great seriousness of what is at stake in the decisions people make with it comes to following Jesus or rejecting him.

Chapter 15 give us another glimpse of the redeemed in heaven. They are identified as those who “had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name.” So these are followers of Jesus who had not succumbed in the war of the beast against them. They are those who had remained faithful to Jesus in persecution or in all the other ways that the beast had tried to tempt them to deny God. These saints are singing what the text calls, “the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb.” And this is what they sing, “Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations shall come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

Now the fact that this is referred to as the song of Moses recalls the Exodus story and particularly the song of Moses recorded in Exodus 15 which worships God because of his mighty deeds of salvation and judgment in delivering his people from Egypt.

The song of Moses and the Lamb is significant because the saints are worshipping God for his mighty deeds and are confessing that God’s ways are just and true. In the context of the book of Revelation, the saints in heaven are worshipping God for his mighty deeds of judgment upon the wicked as well as his mighty deeds of salvation for his people. This is a very important point.

The emphasis in the Bible on the wrath of God against sin and sinners and his judgements upon the wicked is much greater than in the thinking and worship of most Christians and most churches. Few of us reflect the Bible's emphasis in our thinking about God and in our worship of God. It is much more pleasant, of course, to think of God's love and mercy and, of course, biblical worship will rightly focus a great deal on the wonder of salvation in Christ. This is largely what the biblical story is about. But this song of Moses and of the Lamb requires that we ask of ourselves whether our worship of God truly reflects the Bible's emphasis. The Bible as a whole, and the book of Revelation in particular has an awful lot to say about God's judgments upon the wicked and this song of Moses and of the Lamb is celebrating God's amazing deeds, which include his deeds of judgement, and his justice and his truth.

Then we have in the other parts of chapter 15 and chapter 16 the last sequence of seven which mostly have to do with the judgments of God upon the wicked. Earlier in the book of Revelation we have a sequence of seven seals which are opened by the Lamb who is Jesus. Then we have a sequence of seven angels blowing seven trumpets and each time one of the trumpets blows a great judgment is unleashed upon the earth. Here is the last of those sequences of seven in the book of Revelation. This time John sees seven angels with seven plagues. The second plagues turn out to be seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God. Chapter 16 begins with a loud voice from the temple telling the angels to pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.

The results on earth when the bowls are pour out are similar to the results on earth when the seven seals were opened and when the seven trumpets were blown. People experience painful sores, the sea becomes like blood, the rivers become blood, the sun is allowed to scorch people with fire, the kingdom of the beast is plunged into darkness. With the sixth bowl, the enemies of God and his people are assembled for battle on the great day of God the Almighty – in a place called Armageddon. When the seven bowl is poured out there is a great earthquake and the great city is split into three parts. "[E]very island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe." (Revelation 16)

The key point of these judgments is the intensification that happens as history moves closer to the end of the world. We do not know exactly what these symbols refer to, but seems clear is that they describe judgments on a greater scale as we come closer to the end of the age as well as an intensification of the battle between God and his enemies as we come closer to the end of the age.

Chapter 16 emphasizes the justice of God in these judgements. In verses 5-6 an angel says, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve." And verse 7, "And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments."

It also emphasizes that these judgments do not cause people to repent. “Verse 9 says of the wicked, “they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him the glory.”

And there is a message for the people of God. Verse 15, “Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed.”

God’s people are called to stay awake. That is a frequent exhortation in the NT. So is the idea of being clothed. We are to put on Christ. We are to put on the virtues of Christian character. In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul tells the Thessalonians to be sober and alert ready for the return of Christ and to put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. This is what we are being called to do in this chapter in Revelation. In the great battle between God and the forces of evil, as the judgments of God fall upon the wicked, we are to be awake and alert as to what is going on and to continue to pursue faith, love and hope as we worship God and celebrate his justice in his judgments upon the wicked.

Now it is a fair question to ask at this point, “Why is all this necessary?” When we think of the fact that God is almighty and perfectly wise and gracious and merciful, we may wonder, “Could not God have figured out a way to pursue his purposes in creation and salvation in a way that did not involve so much judgment and wrath and suffering on the part of the wicked – let alone the suffering of his people before they are finally delivered? Could not God have found a kinder and gentler way to accomplish his goals?”

It is significant that the perfected saints in heaven do not ask that question. They are worshiping God for all his righteous deeds. Revelation 15:3, “Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations.” The saints in heaven see things much more clearly than we do and they do not question God’s ways; they worship him for them.

One of the significant truths when we wonder about God’s ways is that his way of salvation through the suffering and death of Jesus involved a great suffering on his part. The suffering of Jesus himself. Jesus experienced the wrath of God that we deserve so that we might be forgiven. And it must have been agonizing for the Father to inflict that suffering on his beloved Son. Our salvation involved the suffering of God. The wrath of God that is behind these judgments on the wicked, was poured out upon Jesus on the cross, so that we might be forgiven. We may wonder why God did not save everyone, but we do know that it cost him greatly to save those whom he had chosen for salvation. God could have justly condemned all of us, but he chose to save a people at great cost to himself.

In Exodus 33 in the story where Moses asks God to show him his glory, God says in verse 19, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”

The fact is that history as the book of Revelation interprets it and illuminates it is the unfolding of God’s plan. All of these judgments that we read about in the book of Revelation are in the scroll that is in the hand of the

lamb and every one that happens, happens as result of a word from the throne. And the perfected saints in heaven sing of God's great and amazing deeds.

There is much that we cannot understand. But we do not have to understand in order to trust. God's judgment on the wicked is a good thing. It is reason for worship and praise. And all of what we read in the book of Revelation is to help us to stand fast, to endure, to remain faithful unto death. God does not explain everything to us, but he does assure us that if we trust in him and follow his Son all will be well both now and forever.