

“They Will Rest from Their Labor”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 21

Texts: Revelation 14:1-13; Psalm 2:1-12

The imagery of Revelation 14 is that of stark and utter contrast—eternal torment in burning sulphur with never a moments rest over against eternal rest in the heavenly Zion. In this vision, John sees Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, in all of his messianic glory, standing upon the heavenly mountain, protecting his church and giving unto them the promised reward for faithfulness. For the followers of the beast, who worship and serve the dragon and take his mark, John has only a message of warning: a final judgment is soon to come upon all the earth and its inhabitants.

At present, we are working our way through Revelation chapters 12-14, where John introduces seven of the main characters in the great drama of the history of redemption. Recall that in the opening verses of chapter 12, John introduces the woman—the Israel of God—and her arch-enemy, the dragon, who is Satan. The dragon seeks to consume the woman and her child (the Messiah) but fails, since the Messiah is protected by God and is taken up into heaven. Using apocalyptic symbolism, the successful mission of the Messiah—his birth, death, resurrection and ascension—is depicted by John as war in heaven in which Satan suffers a humiliating and ultimately fatal defeat. The dragon is now cast down to earth where he awaits his final destruction.

Enraged by this defeat and the loss of access to the throne of God, where he had been making accusations against the saints, the dragon once again turns his rage upon the woman. Once more God protects her. In the vivid language of a New Exodus, we read that God hides her in the wilderness while the Devil attempts to destroy her with a flood of lies and deception, from which the woman is miraculously delivered. Frustrated yet again, we read in Revelation 12:17 that the dragon went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, “*those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.*” This is not only a reference to the church—composed of all the redeemed whose names are written in the Book of Life and who belong to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world—it certainly explains to those Christians to whom John is writing the reasons underlying the persecution they were facing in daily life.

Unable to defeat the woman through a direct assault, the dragon now enlists the aid of two surrogates, who collectively form a counterfeit Trinity of sorts. In Revelation 13, we read of two more characters who John now introduces into the story. These are the two beasts empowered by the dragon and they begin to wage war upon the saints. The first beast arises from the sea and is a hideous creature with ten horns and seven heads, representing a world-wide, god-hating empire, which fulfills Daniel’s prophecy of a fourth beast which arises at the dawn of the messianic age, making proud and blasphemous boasts claims against Israel’s God. Not only is this beast the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy, he is a present reality for John’s original audience. For this beast is the Roman Empire, which, in apocalyptic imagery, becomes a kind of biblical prototype of all those subsequent empires which will arise throughout the messianic age intent upon persecuting the church of Jesus Christ.

John speaks of this first beast as recovering from an apparently fatal wound which is probably a reference to the so-called “Nero myth” and to the succession of emperors who followed Nero’s reign of terror. As we have noted, Nero was an incredibly evil man who began to persecute the church and under whose reign emperor worship began to flourish. Nero’s self-absorption brought the Roman empire to brink of

collapse. His decadent lifestyle left the treasury bankrupt, and a fire in AD 64 destroyed much of the city of Rome, which because of poor economic conditions was not immediately rebuilt. And so after Nero took his own life at age 30, it looked as though the Roman empire had suffered a fatal blow. Given his evil *persona* and the legends that surrounded him, rumors were rampant throughout the empire that Nero would come back to life to bring vengeance upon all his enemies.

Then we have the fact that Nero's successors, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian not only restored the empire to its former greatness, under their rule Rome grew more wealthy and powerful than ever. As John puts it, in Revelation 13:3-4: *"One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, 'Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?'"* Whenever a geo-political empire, such as Rome, suffers a blow of this magnitude, only to quickly reverse course and become more powerful than ever before, people will gladly pay it homage. For all intents and purposes Rome appeared invincible. Who is like Rome? Who can wage war against the Roman empire? No one! By regarding Caesar as a deity, men were actually worshiping the dragon who gives the beast its power.

But not only did Rome grow more powerful and wealthy in the years after Nero's death, in many parts of the empire, people increasingly began to view the emperors as deities and Christians began to experience greater and more violent persecution as a result. For a Christian, Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, and many believers paid dearly for their profession of faith and unswerving allegiance to the Son of God.

According to verse 7, [the beast] *"was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation."* By the time John records the Book of Revelation near the end of the first century, Christians in several of the churches to whom he is writing have already been prevented from buying and selling. A number of others had been put to death. The beast is already waging war upon the saints, and apparently, triumphing over them.

To make matters worse, in Revelation 13:11-18, John speaks of an second beast coming up out of the earth, and who together with the first beast appear to rule much of the earth. Identified in Revelation 16:13 as the false prophet, this second beast is likewise empowered by the dragon, this time so as to perform false signs and wonders so that the inhabitants of the earth whose names are not written in the Book of Life worship and serve the first beast, which is the state. If the first beast exercised the power of the sword, this beast uses the power of deception so as to deceive the earth's inhabitants into worshiping those governments who take for themselves authority reserved only for God. This beast, says John, *"forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name."* That number, of course, is the mysterious "666."

The reference to those who were forbidden from buying and selling is to Christians living in the first century who were prevented from engaging in commerce because they would not acknowledge the Roman emperor as a deity, or in the case of those who could not join those trade guilds devoted to pagan deities or emperor worship. In such cases, Christians could not buy or sell, nor exercise their vocation. John's reference to a mark placed on the back of the hand or the forehead, is best understood against the first century practice of the tattooing of slaves, soldiers and devotees of religious cults, identifying them as belonging to another. As an apocalyptic symbol, this mark of the beast stands in sharp contrast to the mark placed upon believers by Jesus Christ, described in Revelation 3:12 in the letter to the church of Philadelphia and again in Revelation 7, when John sees the 144,000 who were sealed with the name of God on their foreheads. The mark of the beast is, therefore, a satanic counterpart to being sealed with the

name of God and of his Christ effected by baptism.

The mysterious number 666 may be a *gematria*, a kind of numeric code in which letters are assigned numeric value in those ancient languages which did not yet use Arabic numerals. As we saw last time, when the Greek words for dragon and beast are translated into Hebrew and assigned numeric value, the number is “666.” When the same thing is done with *Neron Kaisar* (Greek for Nero Caesar), the number is also “666.” This fits perfectly with what we know about the character of Nero and his successors and with the fact that John tells us that “666” is the number of man. This connects Nero directly with the beast and the dragon who empower him. He is the agent of Satan.

There is an important theological significance to this number as well. The number used throughout Revelation for perfection and fullness is seven. Man’s number is “6,” and thrice repeated is “666.” Since the divine number is seven, the corresponding divine number would be “777.” Not only does the number of man “666” consistently fall short of divine perfection, “666” becomes the number which identifies all god-hating empires and their leaders, whenever the dragon, the beast and false prophet form their counterfeit trinity, imitate the works of God, and seek to attract the worship of the world’s inhabitants. As I pointed out last time, Caesar Nero may have been the first whose number is 666, but he will certainly not be the last. The beast and the false prophet of which John is warning us, will rear their heads again and again throughout the course of this age. It is the duty of Christians in every age to fight against these foes with the weapons given to us by God, the preaching of the law and of the gospel.

As we turn to our text Revelation 14:1-13, John introduces the next two sets of characters who play major roles in the drama of redemption, the 144,000 and the angelic heralds who issue a call to the world’s inhabitants to repent, as they announce God’s judgment upon Babylon the Great and all those who worship the beast and his image.

After seeing the dragon, the beast and the false prophet—these members of the unholy trinity—wage war upon the saints and appear to conquer them, John now comforts God’s people with yet another reminder of the final outcome of the redemptive drama. If chapters 12-13 concentrate upon the efforts of Satan to attack the church, the balance of the vision describes what awaits the faithful, as well as reminding those who are Christ’s of the ultimate fate of the dragon and his allies.¹ This is very much the same pattern we have seen in both the seal and trumpet judgments and once again reminds us that Revelation is series of visions which “recapitulate,” or re-tell the story of redemption as it unfolds during that period of time between the first and second advent of Jesus Christ, each from a different theological perspective.

In verse 1, the apostle describes an amazing sight. “*Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.*” That John sees the same group previously described in Revelation 7:1-8, and which have been called a ‘kingdom of priests’ in Revelation 5:10 is clear. As we pointed out earlier, the 144,000 is the church in its fullness upon the earth. Its members have been sealed with the name of God and Jesus Christ and are thereby protected from God’s wrath which comes upon the earth, even though they, at times, must face the rage of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. Now John sees the 144,000—the church—from a different perspective, that of the Lamb’s presence with them in the heavenly city.

When John sees the Lamb standing on Mount Zion a number of biblical images are invoked. For one

¹ Beale, Revelation, 730-731.

thing the Lamb is the true messiah, not merely a messianic pretender as is the beast.² Zion is that place where God sat enthroned in Israel's temple, thus the one who rules from here is the true ruler of the cosmos, not the dragon, nor the beast, nor the false prophet.³ In this glorious scene, the Lamb stands amidst his people in that holy city which God himself will establish and rule after the end of the age.⁴

There are also references here to the past, the present and to the future. Recall that throughout the Old Testament, Mount Zion is that place where God will one day gather and save his believing remnant. Furthermore, it is also that place where God will establish his Messiah and from whence he will rule over the nations. We see this in the form of a messianic prophecy in Psalm 2, our Old Testament lesson, where the Psalmists writes, "*the kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One.*" But "*the One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill' . . . 'I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.'*" Writing from the perspective of the messianic age after Christ's resurrection and ascension, John sees that the Messiah is already established on his holy hill and is even now ruling over the nations.

While the beast may appear invincible to those whose names are not written in the Book of Life, John reminds the church that no nation and no empire, no matter how powerful it may be, can withstand the judgment of the Lamb. Christ is king, not Caesar. And while in this age, the Lamb permits the false trinity to wage war on his people, one day he will indeed dash all his enemies to pieces like so many broken pots. Furthermore, in this vision the Lamb stands in the midst of the his people, where he protects them from those enemies whom one day he will crush. He will never give them more than they can bear and he will always provide for them a way of escape.

In apocalyptic imagery, Mount Zion is a reference to the heavenly city, and is that symbolic place where Lamb dwells with his people, making the premillennial contention that this is a prophecy yet to be fulfilled on the earth during a future millennium, an utter impossibility. Therefore, even though the beast may wage war upon the saints, and for a time, appear victorious, the reality is that the Lamb will ultimately triumph. Through his resurrection and ascension, Jesus Christ presently stands victorious on Mount Zion, just as the prophets said he would. The final defeat of the dragon is therefore assured.

The whole scene is one of contrasts. The name of God and of Christ is written on their foreheads is meant to demonstrate the utter contrast to the mark of the beast. If 144,000 is a number symbolizing fullness (the 12 tribes of Israel x the 12 apostles, x 1000), representing the entire church upon the earth in Revelation chapter 7, here in Revelation 14, the number 144,000 is now the absolute antithesis to the number 666 which shows the incompleteness and counterfeit nature of the dragon's kingdom.⁵ In this particular vision, the 144,000 is not confined to the church upon the earth during the great tribulation as

² See Poythress' comparison of the beast as a messianic pretender, to Christ, in [The Returning King](#), 139-140.

³ Beale, [Revelation](#), 733.

⁴ Beale, [Revelation](#), 731.

⁵ Beale, [Revelation](#), 733.

was the case in Revelation 7. Here the number is symbolic of the sum total of the people of God who now dwell safely—whether on the earth or in heaven—on the spiritual mount Zion with the Lamb who stands in their midst because he has redeemed them.

This is evident in the fact that John now hears “*a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.*” The sound which John hears is that of a new song, which is a loud echo from a very prominent theme throughout the Old Testament in which the people of God sing songs of victory in jubilant celebration after deliverance from their enemies, as in Psalm 33, 40, 96, 98, 144, and 149.⁶ Notice that only the redeemed can sing the new song, because it is a song of victory. The followers of the beast who worship the dragon, cannot sing the new song, since they will be defeated along with the counterfeit trinity they worship and serve.

Notice too that 144,000 are justified sinners. According to John in verses 4-5, “*these are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.*” The symbolic chastity and blamelessness of these people is based upon the fact that they have been purchased by the Lamb through the shedding of his blood on their behalf. They are the firstfruits, those who are redeemed from the mass of humanity. We have in John’s vision a powerful argument for definite atonement—the Lamb’s death did not purchase the world, but the firstfruits from out of the world, namely the sinful men and women who are now regarded as virginal, without falsehood and blameless. The Lamb redeems all of those for whom he dies! And all those whom he redeems are as pure and blameless as the Lamb himself—the blessed fruit of justification.

Beginning in verse 6, the scene of the vision shifts yet again, when John tells us that God will judge all men and nations who worship and serve the beast. The next set of characters, three angelic announcers, now enter the story. They announce that God’s judgment is coming upon the world and that now is time to repent. While the focus in verses 1-5 has been upon the redeemed, reminding them that the Lamb is victorious in the end, in verse 6, the focus shifts back to those who follow the beast, making clear the contrast between the fate of the two groups. In verses 6-7, John tells us that “*I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.’*” According to the noted theologian, Jan Crouch, this is a biblical prophecy fulfilled by the TBN satellite, the “holy beamer.”

As the beast wages war on the saints, God ensures that the gospel will be preached to the ends of the earth. We have already seen this in Revelation 11 with the ministry of the two witnesses. The reference to the four regions, the heavens, the earth, the seas, and the fresh waters, is the same as was mentioned in relation to the seal and trumpet judgments. Jesus himself told his disciples in Matthew 24:14, “*and this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*” But while the gospel will be preached to the whole world, there is no evidence of the conversion of the world as in the postmillennial vision in which all nations supposedly embrace the gospel and the world is effectively Christianized. Although the number of the elect is not small—the

⁶ Poythress, [The Returning King](#), 148.

multitude in heaven is so vast that no man can count them—the angels announce the gospel to the unbelieving world as a form of judgment upon those who worship and serve the beast. The Lamb graciously redeems his people, who dwell with him in Zion. But the earth’s inhabitants would rather serve the beast and worship his image. Their fate is equally certain.

John now sees a second angel, who *“followed [the first angel] and said, ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.’*” The fall of Babylon is a subject John will take up in some detail in Revelation 17-18. We have already read of the fall of this city when we surveyed the trumpet judgments back in Revelation 8-11. Here, we are reminded that Babylon the Great has seduced the nations. They have committed spiritual adultery with her, which explains why the nations would rather serve the beast, than believe the gospel when it is preached.

The point of announcing the fall of Babylon at this point in the vision is to remind the persecuted church in the first century, that the city of man, epitomized by the military, economic and cultural grandeur of Rome will one day fall under the judgment of God. This also serves to remind Christians throughout this present evil age, that the city of man will seek to seduce us, draw us away from Christ, and entice us to commit spiritual adultery. But the great Babylonian whore will receive the sentence of death when the seventh trumpet sounds. The inhabitants of the world have been warned, while the persecuted church should be confident that God will vindicate his cause and grant them victory over their enemies.

In verse 9, John sees yet another angel who announces to the world the horrible fate which awaits those who worship the Beast and his image. *“A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.’*” Once the third angel has spoken, it is clear that those who worship the beast and receive his mark will suffer the same fate as their master.

Let us be perfectly clear about this point—John teaches that all those apart from Christ will suffer eternally. There will be no rest, nor sleep for those who reject the redemption offered them by the Lamb. Neither is hell eternal separation from God. According to John, hell is the eternal presence of God without the cross.

With this angelic declaration, the illusory nature of victory of the beast over the Saints becomes crystal clear. When the beast wags war upon the saints and kills them, they come to life and reign with Christ. But when Christ kills the beast, he and his followers experience what John will later call the second death, which is eternal punishment. Therefore, John not only reminds his readers that God will vindicate his people when they suffer, but he will bring eternal judgment upon all those who receive the mark of the beast. And this warning should be heard by all those who reject the eternal gospel as it is preached throughout the course of this present age—there will never be a moment’s rest, only everlasting torment.

Since this is a section of great contrasts such as that between the number 666 and 144,000 and between the fate of those who worship the Beast and those who dwell with Christ in the heavenly Zion, no contrast is greater than that of the eternal suffering of those who reject Christ and the reward given to those who renounce the dragon and who are redeemed by the Lamb. In verse 12, John tell us that *“this calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus,”* for on this side of the day of judgment, the full extent of Christ’s victory over the Beast and his

followers can only be seen through the eyes of faith. Unbelievers will scoff in the meantime, but that for which we hope, the day of our Lord's return and our eternal redemption, will, for those who reject Christ, become the terrible day of judgment. We must be patient, while they must be warned.

But in a glorious word of benediction to a suffering church, John hears yet one more word of contrast from heaven. "Then," John says, "*I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.'*" Because Jesus Christ has taken his place in the heavenly Zion, having conquered death and the grave, his absolute triumph over all his foes secures the blessing granted to all those who die trusting in him. Indeed, all those who die in Christ are blessed. For not only do they take their place among the great multitude who surround the glassy sea and add their voices to those of the heavenly choir, they will be given rest from their labor. In the heavenly city, there are no more tears, no more pain, no more injustice, no more suffering; only glorious, blessed and eternal rest.

Recall that during his messianic ministry, Jesus gave his followers the following invitation in Matthew 11:28, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*" Our Lord extends that same invitation to us this morning.

If you are not a Christian, Jesus will relieve from the burden of your sins, he will give you rest.

If you are a Christian, but tired and weary, Jesus not only promises to give you rest in the heavenly city, this morning he invites us to his table, where the Lamb himself will refresh us with spiritual food and drink as we make our journey to Zion.

So let us take this moment and rest from our labors and reflect upon the vision given us by John, as we continue on in our journey to the heavenly city where there will be no labor, only rest. For the Lamb stands upon Mount Zion, completely victorious, and we will rest from our labors.

Amen!