

## “God’s Wrath is Completed”

### *Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 22*

*Texts: Revelation 14:14-15:8; Exodus 15:1-19*

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**B**lessing and curse is a prominent theme running throughout the whole of Scripture. We see blessing and curse in the opening chapters of the account of our redemption, when, in the Garden of Eden, God promises eternal life to Adam and Eve upon the condition of perfect obedience to the demands of the covenant of works (cf. Genesis 2:15-17). We see blessing and curse again at the end of the story of redemption, when, in Revelation 14, three angels announce God’s impending judgment upon the earth, while at the same time speaking of the blessedness of those who die in the Lord. But the theme of blessing and curse reaches its climax with the second advent of our Lord and the ultimate dispensing of blessing and curse, that associated with the harvest and the bowl judgments at the end of the age.

We are wrapping up John’s vision of the main characters in the drama of redemption which runs from Revelation chapters 12-14. We will also introduce John’s next vision—one which is closely related—that of the bowl judgments which follows in Revelation 15-16. Recall that in Revelation 12-14, John describes the roles of seven of the major characters in the drama of redemption, viewed from the perspective of a war in heaven in which Satan, having lost, is now cast down upon the earth. John describes how the woman (the Israel of God) is assaulted by the dragon (who is Satan). Because God protects the woman from the dragon, the dragon is enraged and enlists two surrogates to continue his assault upon the people of God.

The first of these demonic surrogates is the beast who rises out of the sea. This is the Roman empire, headed by a series of emperors who are worshiped as deities, and are empowered by the dragon to wage war upon the saints, all the while amazing the world through the means of an apparent resurrection from the dead. But the Roman empire becomes a type of all subsequent world empires which arise throughout the course of this age (which is the entire period of time between the first advent and second coming of Jesus Christ) which persecute the church of Jesus Christ on behalf of the dragon. The Roman empire may have been the first of these satanically energized, God-hating empires, but it will certainly not be the last. Hitler’s Third Reich and the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin are but two recent examples.

Then, John sees a second beast who rises from the earth, and who is identified elsewhere in Revelation as the false prophet. Through the means of satanic deception in the form of miraculous signs and wonders, the false prophet seeks to entice the world’s inhabitants to worship the beast (the state) and therefore, worship the dragon. This beast causes those who worship the state to take the number of the beast (666) on their hands or forehead, so as to be able to buy and sell and to avoid being persecuted by the beast for confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. This counterfeit trinity—composed of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet—repeatedly attempts to deceive the world’s inhabitants by mimicking the works of God.

But this unholy trinity also persecutes the church of Jesus Christ, preventing Christians from buying and selling, and, in many cases, taking their very lives because of their confession of faith in the Son of God, and for their refusal to worship the beast or to take his mark. Many in John’s original audience had already come to face to face with these enemies of Jesus Christ and of his church in the form of the Roman emperor cult.

In Revelation 14:1-7, John sees the next set of characters. These include the Lamb, who stands triumphantly on Mount Zion in the midst of his people, and the 144,000. Unlike those who worship the beast and have taken his mark, the 144,000 are sealed with the name of God and of Christ in their baptism. Triumphantly, they sing the new song of victory. This is the church victorious, now described in terms of chastity and blamelessness, since its members are forgiven of their sins and clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ received through faith alone. Their number, 144,000, is symbolic of perfection and fullness and stands in marked contrast to the number of the beast (666), which is merely the number of man, and even when repeated three times, continues to fall short of divine perfection. Even though we are persecuted by the beast, the church will triumph over Satan and all of his kingdoms, because Jesus Christ is Lord of his church, and he has already conquered death and the grave. And as John reminds us, the Lamb now stands among his people, as their ever-present protector and Lord.

Then in verses 6-12, John sees yet another group of characters, the three angels flying midair. John witnesses the first angel preaching the eternal gospel to the ends of the earth, which is a form of judgment upon the earth's unbelieving inhabitants who have rejected the Savior and who worship and serve the beast. The second angel announces the impending destruction of the idolatrous city of man, Babylon the Great, which has seduced the nations into committing spiritual adultery with her through her great wealth and whose destruction will be described by John in some detail in Revelation chapters 17-18. Then, the third angel announces the fate of all of those who reject Christ and who worship and serve the beast and who have taken his mark.

In a frightening vision of the ultimate act of divine curse, the angel declares that all those who worship the beast and the dragon will face the eternal wrath of God, never to find rest, nor relief from their torment. Hell is not separation from God, but, as John describes it here, hell is to be eternally tormented in the presence of the Holy angels and of the Lamb. Imagine facing God in his wrath, without regard to his mercy—this is what hell is and why the torment is so great.

But even as the angel proclaims this solemn word of woe upon all those who worship the beast, John also hears an amazing word of blessing pronounced upon all of those who die in Christ: *“Then 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.’”* This is the glorious realization of that blessing long ago promised to all those who are united to Jesus Christ through faith. For Christ has died for our sins and was raised for our justification—therefore, when a Christian dies they receive the ultimate blessing, which is rest from all their labors, as they at long last enter into the eternal Sabbath, where there is only rest and eternal blessedness. The blessedness of those who die in Christ, stands in utter contrast to what awaits those who die apart from Christ, having taken the number of beast.

**A**nd so it is after hearing these angels announce blessing and curse upon the earth, that John re-introduces the seventh and final character in this section of Revelation, Jesus Christ, the triumphant Lamb of the heavenly Zion, who returns to earth on the great and terrible day of judgment, depicted here by John as a day of harvest of grain (an image of blessing) and a harvest of grapes, an image of curse, since these grapes are thrown into the winepress of God's judgment.

Turning to our text—Revelation 14:14-16—John is given a vision of the return of Jesus Christ, first depicted in terms of a great harvest of grain. Says John, *“I looked, and there before me was 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. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, ‘Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the*

*earth is ripe.’ So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.”*

As we have seen, the Jews in John’s original audience were very familiar with the Old Testament prophets, and throughout these visions John is repeatedly able to demonstrate to them how Jesus fulfills the remaining Old Testament prophecies regarding the messianic age. No doubt, many in John’s audience upon hearing the words recorded here, immediately thought of the messianic prophecy in Joel 3:12-13, in which it is foretold that Israel’s Messiah will preside over a final judgment upon the earth which entails both blessing and curse. According to Joel, *“Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat [which means “the Lord judges”] for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness!”*

Now, in the vision granted John and recorded at the end of Revelation 14, John sees Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, bring about the great and final harvest, as well as the trampling of the grapes, symbolic of God’s judgment upon the wicked. During his own messianic ministry, Jesus spoke of his return at the end of the age to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new in terms of a great harvest. His words echo this prophecy in Joel. When Jesus explains the parable to the weeds to his disciples in Matthew 13:37, Jesus states that *“the one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.”*

Clearly the harvest at the end of the age is the second advent of Jesus, when judgment comes upon the entire world. The wheat is spared and stored in the barn (v. 29). But the weeds are thrown into the fire. This seems to indicate that the harvest of the grain is associated with the final ingathering of the church, as when Jesus speaks of his angels as gathering the elect from the four corners of the earth, and when one is suddenly taken while the other is left to face the judgment (Cf. Matthew 24:31; 36-41).

Indeed, in Revelation 14:4, John has already spoken of believers as the first fruits of the harvest offered to God.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is likely that John’s vision of a harvest of grain is a glimpse of final blessing, when the harvest of souls is completed and all of the God’s elect have been gathered by the angels.<sup>2</sup>

But the second image—that of the harvest of the grapes—beginning in verse 17 and running through the end of the chapter, is clearly a reference to judgment upon unbelievers. According to John, *“Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, ‘Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth’s vine, because its grapes are ripe.’ The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God’s wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses’ bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.”* That this is a picture of the final judgment is apparent in several ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 212.

<sup>2</sup> See Beale, Revelation, 770 ff., for the opposing view, the harvest of grain is a judgment.

In Isaiah 63:1-3, the prophet speaks of the winepress of God's judgment upon sin. The image is a frightening one and clearly is in the background of John's vision in Revelation 14. God asks of Isaiah, *"Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? "It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save." Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? "I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing. I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground."*

One thing of which we should take note is the fact that the blood of God's enemies—the wine which flows from the winepress—"intoxicates [them] and renders them senseless."<sup>3</sup> This theme in which God's enemies drink in (or consume) God's cup of wrath which is their own blood, also appears here in Revelation 14, as John has already told us in verse 10, that those who worship the beast *"will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath."* What John depicts here, brings to fulfillment Isaiah's prophecy, in which the Messiah who wears a robe soaked in blood—a reference to the cross—will also shed the blood of all those nations who reject him in the final judgment.

But there are other images of judgment in Revelation 14:17-20 as well. The blood of judgment is depicting as flowing up to the horse's bridle (stomach)—a symbol used in Jewish Apocalyptic writings for the complete and utter destruction of an army in battle<sup>4</sup>—and for a distance of 1600 stadia, or about two hundred miles, which would cover the length and breadth of Israel.<sup>5</sup> The entire land will be covered with blood several feet deep—an apocalyptic image of a judgment so horrific no one can fully comprehend it. In addition, John sees an angel who is in charge of fire. This calls to mind the imagery of the tabernacle and the temple throughout the Old Testament in which the blood of sacrificial animals was shed to the point where it visibly flowed down from the altar, before the animal's remains were consumed by fire.

But this also recalls the scene which transpires earlier in Revelation 8:3-5, where we read of, *"another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake."* The angel who hurls fire to earth in response to the prayers of the saints, is probably the same angel who now ensures that those who shed the blood of the martyrs will find their own blood spilt on the day of judgment.

Throughout this vision, God is reminding his suffering and persecuted church that he will indeed vindicate all those whom he calls to face the dragon who wages war upon God's people through the sword of the state and through the lies of the false prophet. But those without faith who reject the Savior cannot grasp the true state of affairs. They may indeed put God's people to death, and by doing so think that they triumphed over Christ and his kingdom. But such is not the case, for God now reminds John that everyone of the martyrs will be avenged. God will shed the blood of all of those who shed the blood

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 213-214.

<sup>4</sup> Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 40-48.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 214.

of his people. They will die outside the city of God, which, as John will tell us later in Revelation 21:27 is that place where, *“Nothing impure will ever enter [the city of God], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”*

And so the vision of Revelation 12-14 covers the entire interadvental age as did the previous visions of the seven churches and the seal and trumpet judgments. We have been taken from the birth, life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of the Messiah in chapter 12, all the way to his second advent and the long-expected harvest of believers and that of judgment upon all those who reject the Messiah and worship and serve the beast here in chapter 14.

**B**ut the vision in Revelation 12-14, is very closely connected to the vision which follows in chapters 15-16, and indeed prepares the way for the series of judgments depicted there which brings God’s wrath to its completion with the return of Jesus Christ to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new at the end of the age.

In the opening verse of chapter 15, John says, *“I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God’s wrath is completed.”* With this declaration, the final, and certainly the most intense cycle of judgment is about to begin. John sees seven angels—seven being the number of fulness or perfection—who will bring human history to its appointed end when they complete their mission. Like the seal and trumpet judgments, these judgments are cyclical and perhaps occur throughout the entire interadvental period, but they are also tied to the end of age.

Unlike the previous cycles of judgment the bowl are much more destructive than either the seal judgments (which affected one fourth of all the earth), or the trumpet judgments (which effect one third of the earth). The seven bowl judgments are not constrained by the mercy and longsuffering of God, so they are much greater in scope and intensity. Mirroring the plagues which came upon unbelieving Egypt during the days of Moses and Pharaoh, the bowl judgments greatly magnify the cosmic aspects of the destruction of the earth and sky depicted in the sixth seal judgment of Revelation 6:12-17, and that of the seventh trumpet judgment of Revelation 11:15-18. Clearly, the bowl judgments come to their fruition in direct connection with those events associated with second advent of Jesus Christ, which is why they are so closely tied to the vision recorded Revelation 12-14, which ends with the two-fold harvest of blessing and curse. For with the seven bowl judgments, which contain the seven last plagues to come upon the earth, God’s wrath is completed.<sup>6</sup>

But even as John observes the seven angels about to bring to pass the final judgment, in anticipation of the glorious end of the age associated with the second coming of Jesus Christ, John sees the Lamb and his victorious church, who are also awaiting the great and glorious outcome of the redemptive drama. The Lamb’s people are no longer the persecuted suffering church, victims of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. They are triumphant! According to John’s testimony beginning in verse 2, *“and I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”*

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<sup>6</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 214-224.

Those who sing the new song are the victors. They are the first fruits of the harvest and have been given to the Father. They have persevered to the end in faith, even in the midst of the horrible persecution from the hands of the beast and the false prophet. And now, having endured, they are saved. Even though the beast has taken their lives and appeared to have conquered them, this scene reminds us of the heavenly reality for all those who have died in Christ. For all who are Christ's, including the martyrs, have come to life and even now are reigning with him in heaven for a thousand years. They have taken their places beside the heavenly sea, which, John now describes as looking like glass mixed with fire. Sealed with the name of God and of Christ, they are victorious over the beast and those who do his bidding. They have truly conquered because death now longer holds them in its grip. The beast has taken their lives, but Christ has given them eternal life!

Once again the heavenly scene resounds with echoes from the Old Testament, especially those of the Exodus and the journey to the promised land. Recall that when God delivered his people from their captivity in Egypt and after immediately they crossed through the sea on dry ground and Pharaoh's army had been utterly destroyed by the waters of judgment, Moses, as covenant mediator, led the people in singing the "Song of Moses," recorded in Exodus 15, and our Old Testament lesson. In Moses' song, the people of Israel joyfully recount the great and mighty deeds of YHWH, to commemorate all that he has done for them. And now, having been delivered from their captivity and bondage to sin, the redeemed in heaven in the presence of the Lamb, not only sing the Song of Moses, they sing the New Song as well, recounting the great and mighty deeds of the Jesus Christ, who has saved them from the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. *"Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."*

As was the case with the seal and trumpet judgments, this next cycle of judgment also begins with a glimpse of the glorious heavenly scene. *"After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed."* God's glory is on display. The seven angels are given the seven bowls of wrath and are ready to pour them out upon the earth. The final act in the great drama of redemption is about to take place. The great and wonderful story is about to enter its final and glorious chapter. God's wrath will be completed.

But until everything is completed, no one can enter the heavenly temple. As in Exodus 40, when the temple was consecrated by Moses and then later in Israel's history when Solomon's temple was completed as recorded in 1 Kings, God's glory was present and so Israel's priests were unable to enter to perform their duties.<sup>7</sup> God is Holy and sinful creatures cannot approach him until every hint and trace of sin is removed from the creation. John is reminding his audience of this very point. Everything is now ready for the end. The stage is set. The Lamb and his people have triumphed. The seven angels are ready to pour out God's wrath upon the earth. They await his final command. And while they wait, God's glory fills the temple and no one can enter. All that remains, is for God's wrath to be completed.

And so beloved, like the seven angels, we too, wait for the great and glorious day yet to come when we

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 218.

will enter into the presence of the Lord. We wait in wonder and anticipation. We do not doubt that day will come. It is not a question of “if,” only “when.” For one day, God’s wrath will be completed and on that day of harvest we will receive the glorious blessing of eternal rest. Maranatha! Come Quickly Lord Jesus. Amen!