

Series Revelation

This Message #22 Revelation 14:1-5

The settings of the visions seen by the Apostle John were in both the heavenly realm and on earth. The heavenly scenes were focused on the presence of God the Father and Jesus the Lamb and the saints who were with them. The earthly scenes described the forces of evil and their hatred toward God and those who worshiped God.

The overall theme of the book is “The Victory of Jesus and His Church Over Satan, His Helpers, and the World.” The word “victory” implies conflict, and the book is filled with descriptions of physical and spiritual warfare and the judgments which have been and will yet be inflicted by our righteous, holy God on non-believing earth dwellers. Generally speaking, the book reflects on the history of the Church since Pentecost, and there is a specific focus on events at the end of this present age.

In chapters 2 and 3 Jesus gave instructions and warnings to seven church fellowships. He wanted them to remain faithful to Him in spite of the pressures they faced from false teachers, political threats, and other difficulties. These seven fellowships were typical of local fellowships which have been in existence all over the world during the past 2000 years.

Chapters 4 through 7 provided us with a spiritual overview of those years. We learned that Jesus, the Savior Redeemer of the world, the Ruler of the universe, exercised His Godly sovereignty and authority by opening the scroll of history which had been predetermined by God the Father. In this series of visions, John saw scenes of God’s throne in heaven and the impact of divine judgments on earth. We learned about the suffering and persecution that the Church would endure. We learned that the circumstances in this series of visions would extend to the end of the age, when time would end, the wrath of God against evil would be poured out, and Jesus would return to earth as Lord of lords and King of kings.

Chapters 8 through 11 described another series of judgments against the evildoers of earth. During these judgments, the people of earth were given the opportunity to repent of their evil deeds. Unfortunately, they were unwilling to change their behaviors, and to stop worshiping demons and idols. This series of judgments also led up to the end of the age.

I hope you recognize that the visions are organized into several “sweeps” or overview pictures of history and time. *[Please refer to the diagram so you have a visual picture of the structure of the book.]* Each “sweep” presents a different aspect of God’s activity in our evil world and how He is moving human events along in order to achieve His purposes. Each “sweep” takes us up to the end of the age, to the moment just before Jesus sets foot on the earth and the forces of evil are destroyed.

Chapters 12-13-14 and the first part of chapter 15 comprise another series of visions given to John. He saw Satan and the woman with the baby boy, the battle in heaven in which Satan was kicked out, and he learned about the determination of Satan to make war against “those who obey God’s commandments.” John then described the two main helpers enlisted by Satan in his warfare. The water monster was the Antichrist, and the earth monster was identified as the False Prophet. They make up the false trinity (Satan, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet) which opposes the people of God.

Please keep in mind that this book was written to alert and prepare believers for the future. It has been made clear to us that believers will be harassed, persecuted, and many killed as the end draws near. In spite of this intimidating and threatening information, the purpose of the book is to comfort and encourage. Several passages describe how physical death is the doorway to the wonderful experience of being with Jesus near His Throne. Believers have been encouraged to be “faithful unto death” and to be “overcomers” of their physical circumstances. This book of Revelation emphasizes that a life yielded to and sacrificed for Jesus is pleasing to God.

The first verses in chapter 14 give us another picture of the blessed status of those individuals who are purchased and redeemed.

Read Revelation 14:1-5

Chapter 14 is part of the interlude inserted after the judgments of the seven trumpets. The sounding of the 7th trumpet meant that creation had arrived at the end of time (*Revelation 10:7; 11:15-19*), but before the arrival of Jesus back on earth and the destruction of evildoers is described, John was given a vision to assure him and his readers of the victorious deliverance and safety of God’s people.

John saw the Lamb, Jesus, standing on Mt. Zion, accompanied by the 144,000 who bear his name and the Father's name on their foreheads. In the Old Testament, Zion was another name for the city of Jerusalem. Specifically, Zion was the place where the temple stood. It represented the seat of God's rule on earth and the place from which He carried out His actions against His enemies. (*See Joel 2:32 and Psalm 76*). In the first century Church, Mt. Zion became a substitute name for heaven. It came to represent the heavenly Jerusalem which would come down as part of the new earth after its restoration. (*See Hebrews 12:22.*) John saw the Lamb standing on Mt. Zion.

The 144,000 is the same group which was previously described in the vision of chapter 7. In that passage the group was sealed and protected by God against the judgments that lay ahead. There are good reasons to think that the 144,000 represent the complete Church. At the beginning of chap 7 the 144,000 were on earth surrounded by enemies, but they were to be protected from the final outpouring of God's wrath on the earthdwellers. In chapter 14 this group was in heaven enjoying the blessedness of heaven. The repeated use of the number 144,000 is to point out that not one of those who were previously sealed had been lost.

Verses 3, 4, and 5 describe the characteristics of the individuals who are in the 144,000. There are five characteristics. 1) They had been redeemed from the earth by the blood of the Lamb. 2) They were pure and undefiled. 3) They "follow the Lamb wherever he goes." 4) "They were purchased from among men and offered as first-fruits to God and the Lamb," and, 5) They were people of integrity, uncontaminated by any falsehood or hypocrisy.

Let's think about some of these characteristics. The statement in verse 4 is controversial: "These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure." Some translations use the word "virgins" to describe these redeemed people. This cannot imply that the sexual relationship within marriage is defiling. Nor does it imply that the 144,000 are all men. Scripture gives clear teaching on this point. From the beginning, God made male and female for one another, and commanded that they reproduce and populate the earth. The Apostle Paul used the marriage relationship as an illustration of the intimate relationship between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:31-32).

The statement is used in a figurative sense. Some commentators focus on the physical aspects, suggesting that the 144,000 have kept themselves from physical adultery and fornication, thus they are virgins in the sense that they had never entered into immoral relations with the other sex.

However, it is better to get beyond the physical connotations and to think of the statement in a strictly spiritual sense. The word “virgins” can refer to spiritual conditions. For example, in the Old Testament, there were occasions in which Israel was spoken of as a “virgin,” but when Israel lapsed into idolatry, she was declared to be “playing the harlot.” When the Israelites followed other gods, God called their behavior “adultery.” Paul used this word “virgin” in this symbolic way when he wrote to the believers in Corinth, “I have espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (*II Corinthians 11:2*). The 144,000 can be thought of as the promised bride of Christ who had kept themselves pure from all defiling relationships with the pagan world system.

The second characteristic I want to explain concerns the statement, “They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.” The first obvious meaning is that they followed the instructions of Jesus’ and the pattern of His life while they were alive on earth. The statement does not refer specifically to martyrdom, but the verse can apply to those who, in being faithful to their calling, were willing to die, as was Jesus. The path of perfect devotion to the will of the Father led the Lamb to his sacrificial death on the cross. In the same way, faithfulness to Him may lead some of His followers to their execution.

The second obvious reason that the redeemed believers follow the Lamb is that they are not their own but that they have been purchased for God at the cost of the blood of the Lamb. Believers had been slaves to sin, but they were redeemed, purchased by Jesus and therefore they belonged to Him.

The third important term used to describe the 144,000 is the word “firstfruits.” In the Old Testament, the “firstfruits” was the offering presented to God at the beginning of the harvest season. It was a thank offering given in advance of the full harvest. Verse 4 does not imply that the 144,000 were the “firstfruits” of a future larger harvest of other believers. Rather, the contrast here is between purchased believers and the rest of humanity. Note in verse 4 that the “firstfruits” had been “purchased away from men.” In other words, whoever was not part of these “firstfruits” had not been separated from non-believers and did not belong to the Lord.

The last phrase in verse 5 summarizes the characteristics of the 144,000: “they are blameless.” Other translations use the words: “without blemish” and “spotless.” These words were used in the Old Testament to describe the quality of the animal sacrifices which were suitable to be offered to God. The point is that individuals who make it into heaven must be perfect in all their ways.

This doesn’t mean that we are required to be sinless before we become acceptable to God. None of us would be acceptable to God if that was the requirement. We must remember that the “multitude of people who will stand before the throne” are those who have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb,” who “have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb” (*Revelation 7:14*). Jesus is the One who “has freed us from our sins by his blood” (*Revelation 1:5*). He is the One who “gave himself up for the Church to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, in order to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (*Ephesians 5:25-27*). Holiness is a gift from God. It is part of His grace which comes to us through Jesus.

There are several important contrasts brought out in verses 1 through 5. Earlier I mentioned that Jesus was standing on Mt. Zion. This is a place which, because it is the seat of God presence, is considered to be firm, stable, and holy. This scene of Jesus is in contrast to a previous scene in which the dragon was standing on the shifting sands of the seashore.

Another important contrast concerns the marks given to people. Those who were standing with Jesus had “his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads. The followers of the beast were stamped with the mark “666” on their right hands or foreheads. The marks of both groups were symbols of ownership and allegiance.

Other contrasts can be recognized in the characteristics of those who were with the Lamb and those who followed the ways of Satan and his helpers. These verses are comforting to us because the followers of Jesus are in radically different circumstances than evildoers.

I want to end this message by focusing on verses 2 and 3. The Apostle John not only saw the Lamb and the saints on Mt. Zion, he also heard sounds from heaven. At first the sound he heard was like the roar of a mighty cataract – something on the order of Niagara Falls, and “like a loud peal of thunder.” Somehow, the sound also resembled “harpists harping on their harps,” which is the way the Greek language states it.

The 144,000 were singing a new song. “New songs” are mentioned several times in Scripture. They always have the theme of deliverance. For example, after the Hebrews escaped from Egypt, they sang a new song. There is another example back in chapter 5: the Elders sang a new song to Jesus, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.”

The 144,000 were those purchased people. They knew that they had been delivered from the perils of earth and the wrath of God because of their relationship with Jesus. Verse 3 explains that “no one could learn the song except ... those who had been redeemed from the earth.” This meant that the angels and elders and the other heavenly creatures could not participate in this song of victory and thanksgiving. Only those who had paid the price of endurance in the faith were qualified to sing. Because the 144,000 redeemed had personally experienced the deliverance provided by God in Jesus, they were qualified to sing the new song. The creatures of heaven were the audience.

There is an old hymn which expresses verses 2 and 3 perfectly. The text is printed on the handout. The text was written in 1894. The verses of the hymn tell the story. The refrain repeats the result.

**There is singing up in Heaven such as we have never known,
Where the angels sing the praises of the Lamb upon the throne,
Their sweet harps are ever tuneful, and their voices always clear,
O that we might be more like them while we serve the Master here!**

Refrain

***Holy, holy, is what the angels sing,
And I expect to help them make the courts of Heaven ring;
But when I sing redemption's story, they will fold their wings,
For angels never felt the joys that our salvation brings.***

**But I hear another anthem, blending voices clear and strong,
“Unto Him who hath redeemed us and hath bought us,” is the song;
We have come through tribulation to this land so fair and bright,
In the fountain freely flowing He hath made our garments white.**

Refrain

**Then the angels stand and listen, for they cannot join the song,
Like the sound of many waters, by that happy, blood washed throng,
For they sing about great trials, battles fought and vict’ries won,
And they praise their great Redeemer, who hath said to them, “Well done.”**

Refrain

**So, although I’m not an angel, yet I know that over there
I will join a blessed chorus that the angels cannot share;
I will sing about my Savior, who upon dark Calvary
Freely pardoned my transgressions, died to set a sinner free.**

Refrain