

Series Revelation

This Message #23 Revelation 14:6-13

The book of Revelation was given to the followers of Jesus for their encouragement and comfort. At the beginning of the book, the Apostle John wrote, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy. And blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (*Revelation 1:3*).

The visions in the book can be divided into two types: they are either pictures of the blessed status of faithful followers of Jesus or descriptions of the sad and dismal status of individuals who refuse to follow Jesus.

Jesus wants the readers of this book, including us, to be hopeful and positive about the future. However, He did say that life here on earth might not be always pleasant. He said several times that His followers would encounter false teaching, persecution and opposition, and that there was the possibility of martyrdom because the majority of people on earth are in rebellion against God and caught up in the system of worldly evil values and behaviors. However, in spite of the difficulties that believers will have in this earthly physical life, this book of Revelation makes it clear that the benefits of faithfulness to the commandments of God far exceed the pain and suffering of this life.

On the other hand, Jesus wants us to understand just how horrible will be His judgments against the doers of evil. The detailed descriptions of God's wrath in this book have two purposes: First, to motivate believers to faithfulness to Him. Jesus wants to spur on all of His followers, especially those who might be under duress, or facing temptation, or simply discouraged and weary. The assumption is that when believers are confronted with the alternatives of eternity with Jesus or eternity in hell, they will be eager to follow the ways of God, no matter the cost. As the verse quoted earlier states, "'Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and ... takes to heart what is written in it.'"

The second purpose for the descriptions of the judgments has to do with God's mercy: Jesus wants non-believers to repent of their sins and recognize God's sovereignty. Historically, the people of earth have disregarded and rebelled against God even though He has revealed Himself through creation, through miraculous works, through the incarnation of His Son, and through the testimony of many prophets and witnesses. God's final effort to get the attention of earthdwellers will be to subject them to a series of supernatural judgments in the hope that some of them will wake up spiritually and acknowledge His Lordship. As Scripture declares: The Lord "is patient, ... not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (*II Peter 3:9*).

We are currently looking at the series of visions which is in chapters 12 through 15. There are seven separate visions in this "sweep" or "overview." Last week we thought about the blessed status of the 144,000 who were standing with the Lamb on Mt. Zion in heaven. They "had been redeemed from the earth," "purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb."

The particular vision we will focus on today concerns God's final statements to the people of earth before judgment falls.

Read Revelation 14:6-13.

In these verses the Apostle John sees events that will occur immediately before the personal appearance of Jesus back on earth. In the series of the trumpet judgments, the seventh trumpet was sounded. It was then announced that "The kingdom of the world has (already) become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ," and that "The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding the servants and saints of God, and for destroying those who destroy the earth" (*Revelation 11:15-18*).

Today's reading informs us that three angels will deliver a message for the people on earth before judgment actually falls. These three angels fly in mid-heaven so they can be seen and heard by everyone. They will inform people exactly why they will face the final wrath of God.

Since these verses follow so closely the remarkable picture of the 144,000 in heaven, there is the assumption that these two visions are connected. The question is this: are the proclamations of the angels addressed to the saints in heaven or to unbelievers on earth? We can restate the question another way: Are these verses intended to be an encouragement to the readers of this book or a final warning to unrepentant earthdwellers?

Several commentators are of the opinion that the message of the angels is primarily for the benefit of the followers of Jesus during this present church age, and that would include us. These commentators think that the messages are intended to highlight the contrast between the fate of those who have repented and are with the Lamb in heaven, and those who have refused to repent and remain on earth. If this thinking is correct, then the proclamations serve as both an encouragement and a warning to believers, including us, to remain loyal and true to Jesus. I'm sure we do not want to suffer the fate of the earthdwellers.

There are several reasons for this opinion. First, the "eternal gospel" which is proclaimed by the first angel is unusual. The good news of the gospel is usually about Jesus' death and resurrection, and it is presented in such a way that sinners may repent and believe that Jesus is the Savior. In these verses neither Jesus nor His sacrificial death are mentioned. There is no call for repentance. There is no offer of salvation. The "eternal gospel" proclaimed here is not the gospel of God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ. Instead, as the following verse indicates, it is a summons to the nations to fear, honor, and worship the Creator God, the One who made "the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water."

The "eternal gospel" in verse 6 is the gospel which has been preached since the time of Adam and Eve. This gospel concerns the power and authority of God. His power and authority are revealed in nature. One of the well-known Psalms begins with the words, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (*Psalms 19:1*).

The Apostle Paul commented on this fact when he wrote, “What may be known about God has been made plain to everyone. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (*Romans 1:20*). Paul concluded his comment by stating, “therefore, people have no excuses” for not believing in God. The evidence is all around us.

People may refuse to worship Jesus as Savior, but there is no way they can avoid acknowledging God as Creator except by denying the evidence and suppressing the truth. Unfortunately, that is what happened. People in the first generations of human existence had the opportunity to acknowledge their Creator God, but very few did so. The truth of God was suppressed by wicked and godless people.

The Apostle Paul described what happened: “What may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them. ... Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, and their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ... Since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind” (*Romans 1:18-28 excerpts*). Throughout human history, mankind has generally ignored and rejected the truth and reality of God.

The pronouncement of the first angel will undoubtedly be a surprise to the inhabitants of earth. They will not only be ignorant of their Creator God, but they will have been dazzled by the powers displayed by the Antichrist and his False Prophet. You will recall that the Antichrist was restored to life after suffering a fatal wound, and that the False Prophet will “perform great and miraculous signs” in order “to deceive the inhabitants of earth” (*see Revelation 13:3, 12-14*).

Earthdwellers will be literally “blinded by the god of this age (Satan) so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (*II Corinthians 4:3-4*). It will be the responsibility of angel number one to remind them that they are about to face One who is mightier than the forces of Satan, the One who is the source of all things in heaven and on earth.

At the end of the age, earthdwellers will have no way to avoid God. The Apostle Paul explained: “We will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me, and every tongue will confess to God’” (*Romans 14:10-11; quotation from Isaiah 45:23*). Paul also wrote “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father” (*Philippians 2:10-11*).

The second reason that the proclamations serve as both an encouragement and a warning to believers relates to the announcement of the second angel, “Fallen is Babylon the Great.” In Scripture Babylon the Great represents the world system which is in rebellion against God. John does not give an explanation of this term. He assumes that the readers who are familiar with the Old Testament, in particular the book written by Daniel, will understand the reference.

In the time of Daniel, the ancient city of Babylon was the political and religious capital of the first world empire of the era known as “the times of the Gentiles.” We learned that the Babylonian empire was followed by three other empires, the Medeo-Persian, the Greek, and the Roman. Babylon represented the “head” of these empires which are all depicted as apostate, being organized politically, economically, and religiously in opposition to and in defiance of God. The second angel announced that Babylon was fallen, and about to be judged, because the spirit of Babylon had infected all nations. This is the spirit of godlessness which, in every age, prevents people from seeing the reality of the Creator God. According to the angel, Babylon was like a prostitute who made the nations intoxicated through her evil illicit relations.

For the early church, the city of Rome was like Babylon. Think about the parallels: Rome had conquered Jerusalem just as had Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Both conquerors destroyed the temple. The leaders of both empires tried to suppress traditional religious practices. From the second angel, the earthdwellers learned that their system of thinking and acting was doomed.

The third reason that the proclamations of the angels were both encouragement and warning to believers relates to the punishment which will be inflicted on the earthdwellers. All those who will be identified with the dragon (Satan) and the two beasts will be the objects of God’s wrath.

God's wrath is not a human type of emotion. His wrath is His holy reaction to all things sinful. God intends to restore His kingdom on earth, and before that can happen, the earth must be purged of all evil and all things which have been contaminated by evil. God's future kingdom will be holy through and through, just as God is Himself so holy that nothing that is not absolutely pure can abide in His presence. Individuals who have not become pure in the blood of the Lamb are, sadly, the objects of divine wrath. On the other hand, those who, as Scripture says, "have washed their robes and made them spotless white in the blood of the Lamb" will stand with the Lamb for eternity.

Verses 9 through 11 vividly portray the torment which is awaiting all who will worship the beast. They will drink the wrath of God and endure eternal torment in fire and brimstone. Wrath is often pictured in Scripture as a draught of wine. For example, Jeremiah wrote, "the nations to whom the cup of God's wrath is given shall 'drink and stagger ... be drunk and vomit, fall and rise no more'" (*see Jeremiah 25:16-27*). God's wrath is pictured as a cup of wine that is undiluted, that is, untempered by His mercy and grace.

The torment of those who worship the beast will be with fire and brimstone. The language of burning sulfur was the strongest possible way for John to describe gruesome agony. In chapter 9, the horse-demons from the Abyss tormented earthdwellers with fire, smoke, and sulfur. One-third of humanity were killed. God allowed this to happen in the hopes that some survivors would repent. In the verses here in chapter 14, the angel announces that all people who follow the beast will experience a similar torment, only this time the torment would be forever and ever.

Suffering in the presence of the hosts of heaven and the Lamb will make their experience even more grievous. The sight of the Lamb will undoubtedly be a very distressing factor in the pain of the wicked because they will have eternity to reflect on their rebellion and rejection of God's love and provision of salvation.

The stages of judgment announced by the third angel can be summarized this way: 1) the people will drink the undiluted wrath of God; 2) they will be tormented with burning sulfur; 3) there will be no relief from their agonies. There are two expressions which emphasize the length of their judgment: “forever and ever,” and “day and night.” Those who have chosen to follow the beast will have all eternity to regret it. In contrast, the redeemed will be “resting from their labors” and experiencing the blessings of the Lamb.

There is one more reason that the proclamations of the angels are both encouragement and warning to believers. Verses 12 and 13 apply all this information to the followers of Jesus. There are three specific instructions: Believers must have “patient endurance;” they must be “obedient to God’s commandments;” and they must remain “faithful to Jesus.” These instructions have actually been given several times previously in this book. The followers of Jesus are called to persevere through persecutions and suffering. They are alerted to the possibility of martyrdom. They are expected to be “overcomers.”

John heard a voice from heaven commanding him to write a beatitude: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” The command to write emphasizes the importance of the application and backs up the statement in verse 12 with divine authority. The followers of Jesus are given assurance of blessing.

Those who are executed because of their faithfulness to Jesus will enter into the kind of unique spiritual rest which we thought about last week. This “rest” was also described back in chapter 7: “they are before the throne of God ... He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. ... The Lamb will be their shepherd. ... God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (*Revelation 7:15-17*). The labors from which they will rest are not those of normal toil, but the troubles they will experience because of their steadfast faith.

Scripture states repeatedly that all people will be “judged according to their deeds” (see, for examples, *Matthew 16:27; Romans 2:6; 14:12; I Corinthians 3:12-15; II Corinthians 5:10; 11:15; II Timothy 4:14; I Peter 1:17; Revelation 2:23*). The Apostle Paul explained: “God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (*Romans 2:6-8*). What we do for or against God determines what we receive from God.

This does not imply that we are saved by our own work efforts. Paul was explaining the quality of life and the actions of people after they were saved. Scripture assures us that the deeds of people who “follow the Lamb” will follow after them and be recognized by God.

The final comment I want to make about this passage concerns the phrase “from now on” which appears in the middle of verse 13. These words cannot mean those believers who will yet die at the end of the age because there is no more time remaining. Rather this blessing applies to all the believers who would die after John wrote this book; in other words, to all believers from the 1st Century until the present time and up until the end of the age. The application is for us. We must remain faithful. We must keep on following Jesus.