

Series Revelation

This Message #24 Revelation 14:14-20

We are in the middle of the series which describes the outcome of the conflict between Jesus and His Church and Satan and his followers. In previous visions in this series we learned that the devil had been cast out of heaven, that his time for evil activities was limited, that he was determined to make the circumstances of the followers of Jesus as miserable as possible, and that he raised up two monstrous helpers to assist him in his efforts. We also learned that the final trumpet had sounded, that believers were standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion, and that the angels had pronounced the final judgments that were about to fall on the followers of the beast.

The descriptions in this set of visions are both glorious and terrible. As believers, we can rejoice in the security we are promised and in the positive descriptions of our future status with Jesus, but we shudder in revulsion at the severity of the judgments which non-believers will face.

Let's keep in mind the purpose of the visions in this "sweep." They provide the followers of Jesus with both encouragement and warning. Let's think about psychology for a moment. Psychologists who are concerned with behavior modification talk about the techniques of positive reinforcement and aversive punishment. That's the method which offers a reward for good behavior and inflicts pain for an incorrect response. That's the way animals are trained and it is also an effective way to teach humans how to pursue what is good and avoid the bad.

The main purpose for the visions in this series is to motivate us as the followers of Jesus to do what is pleasing to God and to avoid the consequences of what makes Him angry. Think of the visions as God's way to provide psychological and emotional guidance, to influence us to be faithful and obedient to His ways, and make us adverse to the kinds of punishment that will be meted out to rebellious and evil people.

There are two visions described in the verses we are going to read today. Verses 14 through 16 use the picture of a harvest of grain to help us understand one aspect of the judgment at the end of the age. Verses 17 through 20 picture the harvest of grapes, which gives us another and very different perspective on the judgment.

Read Revelation 14:14-20

The harvests of grain and wine were essential annual activities in Bible times. A successful harvest was the culmination of months of hard work. Without a successful harvest there would be starvation. Because the harvest activities were so important in the thoughts and lives of the people of Israel, they were frequently used by the prophets and writers of the Old Testament as metaphors and illustrations.

For example, when God wanted to describe the judgment of Babylon, He said through the prophet Jeremiah, "The Daughter of Babylon is like a threshing floor at the time it is trampled; the time to harvest her will soon come" (*Jeremiah 51:33*).

When God wanted to describe His day of vengeance and redemption He said through the prophet Isaiah, "Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? ... Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress?" The Lord then answers these questions with these words: "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; ... For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year of my redemption has come. ... I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground" (*Isaiah 63:1-6*)

The prophet Joel combined both metaphors when he quoted God with these words: "Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, 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" (*Joel 3:12-13*).

In the New Testament, Jesus used the illustrations of sowing and reaping in several parables. For example, in the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds He spoke of good seed which grew up in the midst of weeds planted by an enemy. He said, "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 will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. The angels will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (*Matthew 13:24-30, 36-42*).

These predictions from the Old and New Testaments are fulfilled in the verses we just read from Revelation. Most Bible commentators make a distinction between the harvest judgments of grain and grapes. They associate the grain harvest in verses 14 through 16 with the ingathering of the righteous into heaven and the harvest of verses 17 through 20 with the judgment of evildoers.

This is, I think, a reasonable interpretation since this series of visions has been contrasting the fates of believers and non-believers. Verses 14 through 16 are for our encouragement and verses 17 through 20 are a warning for us. These two descriptions are another example of God's use of psychology — an example of His efforts to influence our desires and behavior.

Before I talk about the relevance of the harvest of the grain to us, I need to provide some more background. I need to talk about the "rapture" of believers. "Rapture" is a theological term familiar to most Christians, although the word itself is not used in Scripture. The term explains a Greek word which means "to catch up" or "to snatch away." In Christian theology, the "rapture" or "catching away" refers to the belief that the followers of Jesus will be lifted from the earth at the end of the age to meet Him in the air.

The passage which most clearly expresses this thought is in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Thessalonian Church fellowship. He wrote, "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words" (*1 Thessalonians 4:15-18*).

In that passage, Paul used the phrase "be caught up together" to refer to the ascension of both those believers who had died and those believers who would still be alive when Jesus returns. [*According to Paul, those who have died will rise first. I'm sure you know reason: They will have six more feet to travel than those who are alive on the surface of the earth.*]

Another important relevant passage was spoken by Jesus to His disciples. He said to them, "For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ... At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with great power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" (*Matthew 24:27-31*).

Then a short time later, Jesus added, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (*Matthew 24:36*).

Verses 14 through 16 are the fulfillment of several statements about the return of Jesus. First of all, John saw "one 'like a son of man.'" This description was originally used by the prophet Daniel. In one of his visions, Daniel said he "looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days (the Father) and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power. All peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (*Daniel 7:13-14*).

The “one like a son of man” is the Messiah, Jesus. In the first chapter of this book John described Jesus as “like a son of man” (*Revelation 1:13*). Jesus spoke of Himself as the Son of Man more often than by any other title.

Second, notice how Jesus is described in verse 14. He is seated on a cloud. This is mentioned three times in these verses for emphasis. In Scripture clouds are closely associated with both the ascension and the second coming of Jesus. When Jesus ascended into heaven in the presence of His followers, Luke stated that “a cloud hid him from their sight.” As His followers “were looking intently up into the sky as he was going,” ... two angels stood beside them and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus ... will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (*Acts 9-11*).

In the prologue of this book, the Apostle John wrote these words: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him.” (*Revelation 1:7*). And in the verses I quoted earlier, Jesus said, “They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with great power and great glory” (*Matthew 24:30-31*). Our passage today describes the fulfillment of that event.

Third, notice that the Son of Man has a gold crown on his head. This particular type of crown (*stephanos = wreath*) signified victory in a competition. The conflict with Satan was finished. Evil had been overcome. “The kingdom of the world had become the kingdom” of Jesus (*Revelation 11:15*). Jesus was victorious.

Fourth, the “son of man” had a sharp sickle in His hand. He was ready to go to work. The sickle was the tool used when harvesting grain. In this case, the sickle was to be used in gathering the good grain, those believers who were still alive on the earth.

In verse 15, “another angel came out of the heavenly temple.” This indicated that the angel had been in the presence of the Father. The angel conveyed a message from the Father, “Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest is ripe.” When He was on earth, Jesus stated that He did not know the hour of His return (*Mark 13:32*) and that the hour would be determined by the Father. In this vision, John heard the heavenly Father issue the command. “The time to reap had come.”

Immediately, “He who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth and the earth was harvested.” This is a very brief statement without details but some details can be filled in from other passages. Remember the passage I quoted earlier: “he will send his angels ... and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (*Matthew 24:30-31*).

This thought is repeated in the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds. In that parable the farmer did not permit his helpers to remove the weeds in the field while the wheat was growing “because,” he said, “while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: ‘First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn’” (*Matthew 13:29-30*).

These are a few of the descriptions about the events at the end of the age. What we know for sure is that Jesus and the angels will separate His followers, His elect, from among the wicked people of earth, and “catch them up” into His presence. The harvest in verses 14 through 16 is of believers.

Then the events of verses 17 through 20 will occur. There are no doubts about the interpretation of these verses. It clearly and vividly pictures the judgment of the wicked in terms of a harvest of grapes. This is the most gruesome of all the scenes in Revelation. The evildoers of earth are cast like grapes into “the great winepress of God’s wrath.” This harvest represents divine judgment. There is no rescue or salvation deliverance for the individuals in this part of the vision.

In Biblical days, the wine harvest was a joyous feast. For believers at the end of the age, it will also be a time of rejoicing. For them the judgment of evildoers will represent vindication. The believers had faithfully endured through many trials which had been inflicted on them by the people of the world. Finally their enemies were receiving just recompense for their evil deeds.

In Biblical days, grapes were trampled by foot in a trough which had a drain through which the juice would flow into a lower collecting basin. Just as the grape clusters were trodden on and crushed, just so will be the wicked. Because they had been guilty of “shedding the blood of God’s saints and prophets” (*Revelation 16:6*) they will be repaid according to their deeds.

The flow of blood produced in the trampling is incredible. 1600 stadia, which was a Roman measurement, is a distance of about 180 miles, roughly the length of Palestine. The entire land is pictured as being inundated in blood to a depth of about 4 feet. This is impossible to imagine. We need to keep in mind that this vision is explained in the most graphic terms possible, and that God wants to make as great an impression on the readers of this book as possible. This vision is based on metaphor, so this description of blood is also presumed to be a hyperbolic metaphor.

Let's sum up what we have learned. At the beginning of chapter 14, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and at the end of the chapter He is sitting on a cloud with His sickle. In the earlier vision all of the Lamb's redeemed people are safe and secure. In the latter vision the separation of the Lamb's people, the wheat, from the evildoers, the weeds, is explained. I hope you recognize the incentives given to us in this series of visions. We are encouraged to be the kind of people that God wants us to be so that we will not suffer the consequences of evildoers.

All the world's people are, metaphorically speaking, either grain or grapes. God has guaranteed that His grain will be safely gathered into His barn. He assures us that the grapes will be trodden in His winepress. I sincerely hope that everyone who reads this chapter will want to be part of the grain harvest. The challenge for us is to live now in such a way that we will be ready for the harvest at the end of the age.