

Commentary on the Revelation

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Between the series of judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls), John inserts interludes that provide insight into the cause of opposition to Christ in this life, as well as the final redemption of God’s people and the crushing in judgment of all His enemies. The repetitious phrase, “And I saw” or “And I looked,” appears seven times in these chapters introducing seven visions. Such phrases appear three times in our chapter today structuring our passage (14:1-5, 6-13, 14-20).
- 1) “And I looked:” Victorious saints in heaven, vv. 1-5
 - a) The vision, v. 1

The phrase, “And I looked, and behold,” indicates another in the series of visions that God gave John to record, the fourth of seven (see 12:1; 13:2, 11 [sometimes, “And I saw” or similar phrase]). In the previous visions the subject was the persecution of the people of God through history (the evil Trinity, Satan, and the two beasts). In this chapter the focus shifts from torment to protective comfort and judgment. Here we are told of the defeat of the great persecutor in the final day and the reward of God’s people, the final vindication of God and believers. In these remaining visions, the focus is not on the centuries, but upon culmination at the end

of times. The point of this vision is that the saints of God have an assured, blessed future through the redemption procured by Christ and through their faithful perseverance in it.

John's vision is that of the Lamb, the vindicated triumphant Lord Jesus (5:6, 8, 12-13) on Mount Zion. Since within the book,⁰ the Lamb is always seen in heaven with His people (17:9-14), Zion most likely is the heavenly city, the ultimate presence of God (Rev 21-22). The OT background of John's insight is likely Ps 2:6, a text Peter quoted in Acts 4 to explain the triumph of Christ through the resurrection. It is interesting that in this chapter the Lamb is standing on a mountain (v. 1), while the beast in 13:1 stood only on sand!

The meaning of the 144,000 is the same as those sealed in 7:4. In chapter seven, the symbolic group was identified as the persecuted, though protected, through the centuries; here, they are seen as the triumphant (7:9-10). The name inscribed on the foreheads of the triumph is the same as the seal in 7:18; it is a mark of ownership. It is because of God's protective mercies, even if it entailed death, that they remained faithful to Him living through difficult, even hostile, circumstances.

A minor point in the verse is whether or not the saints in the vision have two or one name inscribed on their foreheads, an obvious opposite to the mark of the beast. I take it that John saw visionary inscriptions, but the meaning is singular, the ownership of God. The ownership is singular (God); the persons are two.

b) The worship of saints in heaven, vv. 2-3

What John then heard was a great celestial heavenly concert with singers. The "they" are the sealed or triumphant saints symbolized by the number 144,000. The idea of a "loud sound" is found in 19:6, referring to the judgment of the "great harlot" and the reign of God most fully and completely at the end of times. These are they who "have been purchased", a phrase indicating those for whom Christ died.

In the Hebrew Scriptures a "new song" is always an ascription of praise for victory over an enemy; here it is also. It is the song of saints, certainly more than 144,000 suggesting its symbolic usage.

c) The character of the saints in heaven, vv. 4-5

The most poignant question to ponder in v. 4 is the phrase, "not defile by women." Are we to understand this literally, that the purchased are celibates (a group within the group more holy because of their choice to remain "chaste [literally, a male virgin])?" Does sexual activity within certain prescribed limitations render a person less spiritual than a celibate? The answer is clearly no. Therefore, it would seem best to understand the phrase as symbolic as those who had remained faithful to the true bride,

Jesus Christ, by not conceding to the lure of the pagan culture engulfing them ("the great harlot [17:1]). Says Stott, "It means that the people in question have kept themselves completely free from intercourse with the pagan world system (177)."

The second characteristic of these saints is the antithesis of the former; they have not gone astray in their Christian walk, but have "followed the Lamb." The description of these saints as "first fruits" suggests a totality (Exod. 23:19, 34:76), those who "follow the Lamb." It means here a collective group, not a sequentially collected group.

The third characteristic of this group should be taken with a symbolic nuance as well. These are they who did not corrupt their witness as Christian to be spared of the terror of a moment. "No lie" and "blameless" does not mean perfection in this life, the Bible and experience witness to this of God's people, but their perseverance in their witness to their faith in Christ.

2) Three announcing angels, vv. 6-13

a) Of judgment on unbelievers, vv. 6-7

The phrase, "And I saw," announces another vision, the fifth in the series. It is clearly an announcement, more than a proclamation (more a judicial declaration than an invitation). It is remarkably similar to the "three woe-judgments" of 9:1-21, dealing with judgment on the enemies of Christ.

The phrase, "an eternal gospel," is found only here in the book. The audience of those to hear the message are earth-dwellers, meaning the determined lost. "Those who live or dwell on the earth" is used of believers" in 5:9 and 7:9, but beginning in chapter ten it is strictly used to denominate unbelievers (10:11, 13:7, 17:15). The preaching of the angel in the vision is not a call to faith (the earth-dwellers have rejected that); it is a call to unbelievers vindicating the faith of the faithful! The good news (the meaning of the word gospel) is that persecuted believers were right after all.

The ground of their just judgment is that they have failed to heed the two-fold exhortation: to fear God and glorify Him. They are instructed to do so but not with a view to faith (perhaps John has the example of Nebuchadnezzar in mind who acknowledged God but remained a pagan (Dan 4:34). The fact of the judgment is that "the hour...has come." "The hour" speaks of divine timing of a predetermined event (the Day of the Lord).

b) Of judgment on "Babylon," v. 8

One of the difficulties in interpreting the book is that it does not treat subjects in a lineal, progressive fashion at times. For example, he mentions the end-time beast briefly in 11:7, but more fully develops its meaning in chapter 13. Here he mentions "Babylon," but explains it more fully in chapters 16-18.

“Babylon” is used symbolically of oppression. Stott notes, “For John, Babylon is the great city, the symbol of man in community opposed to the things of God (180).” Just as the ancient people were crushed with the rise and dominion of a great empire, John uses it as a symbol of the same in subsequent times. It became the great idealization of oppressive governmental regimes (in John’s day the shadowed fulfillment was Rome). Swindoll summarizes the meaning of “Babylon” as symbolic “to refer to the Antichrist’s end-time religious/ political/economic empire (228). John announces, as his vision projects him into the end of times, that “Babylon” has come to its judgment at last (this cannot be literal Babylon because God predicted that literal Babylon would fall and never rise again [Jerm. 51:26, 64; Isa 13:19-26]).

The cause of “Babylon’s” judgment is that she made the nations “drink” of her “wine” in order to exist. “Babylon” made the nations pay the price of conformity to its wicked ways. John is telling us that those who drink Babylon’s wine of idolatry will drink God’s wine of judgment! This interpretation of Babylon’s error, the quest for economic prosperity, is seen in 18:3 where the followers of Babylon are merchants who became “rich on her sensuality.”

c) Of judgment of the beast-worshippers, vv. 9-13

The third angel in the vision announces the consequences of worshipping the beast.

(1) The judgment announced, v. 9

Present tense verbs, as in the case here, indicate continuous action so that John’s point is concerning those who have a continuous, committed association with the “beast,” the world of opposition to Christ.

(2) The judgment described, vv. 10-11

The consequence of following the “beast,” not the Lamb is terrible. The terms John uses are “wine of the wrath of God” and “His anger” to describe the origin of the judgment. The duration of the judgment is unending with images of fire and brimstone expressing torment. That it is before the angels and the Lamb expresses the justice of such judicial action.

The OT background for John’s comments is taken from Isa. 34:5-15, the judgment of God upon Edom for its destruction of Judah. Edom becomes a shadow of judgment upon those who, like ancient Babylon, destroyed the people of God; it will never rise again. In the vision, Edom, as in many other instances, is universalized into an object of judgment for its misdeeds for all who would mistreat the people of God. “Smoke of their torment” is an interesting and tragic image: “smoke” is often a figure of an enduring memorial (in this case to eternal punishment. When you see smoke you think destruction; Edom’s and all who oppose God will face eternal smoke).

The torment of the errant “Trinity” with their followers will be forever while the turmoil of the saints is transitory! The disobedient and rebellious “will have no rest day and night (v. 11).” while the followers of the Lamb will “rest from their labors (v. 13).”

(3) A word of instruction, vv. 12-13

The phrase (“here is the perseverance of the saints”) is parallel to “Here is the perseverance and faith of the saints (13:10)” and “Here is wisdom (13:18).” It is a major theme in the book; in fact, it is the focal point of the moral exhortation; it is the application of the three angel visions of judgment on the beasts and their patrons. It is instruction to endure, to resist compromise, even if it entails suffering. Perseverance involves obedience and faith. The concept behind keeping the commandments is that of conformity to the Scriptures, including the warnings about deception and falsity. “Faith” has to do with conformity to the doctrinal teachings of the Bible as evidenced by 2:13 (there the word occurs with identical meaning).

The “blessed” is most likely symbolized in the 144,000 witnesses. The text does not tell us the manner of their death (the vision concerns the end of time, the moment of final judgment and reward). Not all of John’s readers would face martyrdom, but all should be living martyrs for the Lamb.

John makes it clear (v. 13) that the motive for instruction is not only dire, avoidance warnings, but appropriately so. The rewards for faithfully enduring the momentary pain and ostracism of an opposition are great. “Rest,” not torment, will be their reward! The record of their commitments as evidenced by the way they lived in conformity to Christ, rather than the passing pleasures of cultural conformity will follow them into God’s presence.

3) The final judgment, the campaign of Armageddon, vv. 14-20

Here is the sixth of seven “And I looked” or “Then I looked” phrases indicating a new vision. What appears here is a repetition of the sixth seal judgment.

a) The appearance of the judge, v. 14

The one “sitting on a white cloud” is the Lamb, designated here as the “son of man,” the context being Dan 7:13 (only God comes from heaven in a cloud in the Holy Scriptures). Also, in the Revelation only angels are sent from the throne and they never announce a message that they have not been given). Matthew interpreted 7:13 that Jesus’s coming in the end of times had a two-fold function: to reward the believer and to condemn the rebellious.

b) The judgment announced and expedited, vv. 15-16

Even as God controls the timing of the harvest of grain, barley or

wheat, so he exacts the time of judgment when the end of times will have been reached. From heaven, God the Father, sent a visionary message to the Son of Man to judge the earth and its inhabitants (finally the cup of human sinfulness has become full!). Says Stott: “The time for the intervention of him who bore the sickle is not chosen arbitrarily. He puts in the sickle at exactly the right moment. Persecuted believers may know that if God’s intervention is delayed this is only because it is not yet the right moment to reap. Reaping is certain as soon as the harvest on earth is ripe (185).”

c) The judgment repeated, vv. 17-20

While some scholars have speculated that the section, the announcement of the angel, might be a second judgment (the first a judgment of reward and the second condemnation), this does not seem to be the case because the metaphor of the sickle is in both sections. Further, in Revelation announcements from the throne of God only bring divine retribution (6:1-5; 9:13; 16:7, 17). Also, the reference to “hour (v. 15)” in revelation always refers to a time of judicial judgment. The phrase “treading the wine press” only occurs one other time in the book (19:15) and it refers to judgment. While the object of harvest in the previous section was grain, here it is grapes.

The phrase, “outside the city,” is the most difficult to interpret. The place of the “wine press” of judgment is “outside the city,” but what is the referent? Does it refer to a literal city or are we dealing with a symbol here? It would seem that the city is Jerusalem, but Jerusalem is used in reference to the dwelling place of God’s true people. That is, the judgment is outside the city because unbelievers have no access to it; “Jerusalem” is the habitation of believers finally, exclusively, and totally.

This seems warranted by 20:8-9 in that it places the judgment of unbelievers outside the “beloved city.” Further, if the background of the verse is Joel 3:13 and Isa. 62:2-3 the context is the judgment of the nations.

The “blood from the wine press” is another issue of literal-versus-figurative. While the battle will occur and should be taken literally, the metaphors likely express the horrors and devastation of it and are figurative. Clearly, the “wine press” and “grapes” are metaphoric of a battle and the destruction of people, unbelievers. The physical dimensions of the battlefield are greater than the Jezreel Valley, the Valley of Har-Magedon (16:16) or Armageddon, the site of the last great battle. The dimensions come closer to the extent of the country north to south (200 miles), Dan to Beersheva. Further, the Joel passage (3:2,11-12,14) tells us that God will judge the nations in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, the Kidron Valley, east of Jerusalem, outside the city.

1. A Christian is a Christ-follower; in our passage it is beautifully stated this way, “These are the ones who have followed the Lamb wherever He goes (v. 4).” What does that mean according to our passage? It means (v. 1) that a “Lamb follower” finds her/his significance in the Lamb; it means that she/he has relinquished their life to the Lamb finding a new owner; it means living their lives with a sense of moral integrity, not conforming to the morals of a world that has lost its way engulfed in compromise and contrary to everything associated with being a “Lamb follower.” Can this be said of you? Are there areas of your life that you find it easier to be a follower than others? What are you doing to be a better follower?
2. We live in a world that is becoming more uncertain and dangerous by the day yet our passage tells us that we need not live in fear. He has written His name in our very being (v. 1); our protection and direction is a burden that God has taken to Himself. This does not mean that we will live our lives without pain and disappointment; it means that God will prove Himself sufficient in every privation we experience and someday carry us safely into His presence forever. Can you imagine this! You and I have been “purchased from the earth; we were bought with a price, the very blood of the Lamb, so that God could extend to us forgiveness and call us His children. The angels in our passage sang a “new song (v. 3) in praise to God. Do you feel like you should do that? I think we should!
3. The gospel, a term that means good news, is all of that, but it is more than that. One the one hand, it is the grand and glorious message Christ brought to us, procured its possibility for us, and rose from the death in evidence that it is not a myth. It is the good news that the cost of deliverance has been paid by the only one who could meet the demands of God, God Himself in Jesus Christ. It is the message of life that can spring from death just as Jesus conquered death at the cross. The justice of God has been satisfied (a righteous God can rightly and justly forgive us because of Jesus). However, the bad news in the good news is that to think lightly, to care little, to remain unappreciative, to possess hostility to God by rejecting His claims and offers is grave because without accepting God’s provision through His son, Jesus Christ, the justice that God demands will be ours to pay and we cannot. Are you willing to take an infinite burden upon yourself? The bad news in the good news is if you do not accept God’s way to live you will only find His justice without mercy or grace.
4. The fundamental purpose of the Revelation is to encourage saints of God facing adversity to remain faithful in their commitments and not seek to avoid the pain of identifying with Christ by religious and moral compromise. What is perseverance (v. 13)? It is our willingness to walk with God, to be recognized as a true Lamb-follower even if it means ostracism, ridicule, and even death. That is a true disciple of Christ. Are you willing to pay the cost of discipleship; are you willing to take up your cross and follow Him? What does that look like for you today in your home, your extended family, among friends, in your career?
5. Just as heaven is a very real place; in fact, more real than all the best of experiences we can encounter, so is hell real though we only see it in shadowed form. It is a place of conscious punishment of unbelievers. It is an existence devoid of the mercies of God. It is a frightening reality and beyond the ability to truly grasp as is its opposite. We live in a world that distains the very thought of hell because it has lost any meaning of the concept that God is holy and just, as well as righteous, demanding absolute conformity to His character or forever to be cast out of His presence. I think we should live delighted with the hope that someday we will see the Lord we love; I think, also, that we should live in dread that anyone would miss the way because I failed to point them in

the right way. Is the fact of the judgment of God upon unbelievers a motivation for you to share with unbelievers?

6. What a wonderful verse to meditate upon is this one, “Blessed are those who die in the Lord...they rest from their labors (v. 13). Many people fear death, though they talk of it glibly, but the Christian should find it a great source of delight. As we were blessed in living to have been brought to the knowledge of our redeemer and gained true life through Him, in death we will be translated into His presence. You and I have a blessed life and we will be blessed in death with a deeper experience of life in the presence of the Lamb. While death has a stinging, it is through death that we will gain the one we have come to love. Do you think often of how blessed you are today and how greatly blessed you will be when your days end?
7. “Babylon” in the Revelation is not so much a city or the seat of a government; it is a symbol of human pride and self-reliance. It is the assertion that we can live without God making substitute gods of our choosing to fill our lives with meaning often related to wealth, health, beauty, and pleasure. Our culture has made itself “drunk (v. 8)” on the wine of the passion of her immorality, which is idolatry. Someday “Babylon” will fall to pieces under the judgment of God when Jesus comes to establish the new heavens and the new earth. All of our worldly values without God will vanish and false hopes will be exposed as empty, meaningless, broken crutches that cannot sustain life. Are there ways that “Babylon” has a grip on your life? Do you value what some day will vaporize into nothingness?