

A PEOPLE OF HOPE IN THE MIDDLE OF JUDGMENT:

Revelation chapter 14 (NIV)

*"Then I looked, and there before me was the **Lamb**, standing on Mount Zion, and with him **144,000** who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the **144,000** who had been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they remained virgins. They follow the **Lamb** wherever he goes. They were purchased from among mankind and offered as firstfruits to God and the **Lamb**. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.*

*Then I saw another **angel** flying in mid-air, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.'*

*A second **angel** followed and said, 'Fallen! Fallen is **Babylon** the Great,' which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.'*

*A third **angel** followed them and said in a loud voice: 'If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the **Lamb**. And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name.'*

*This calls for **patient endurance** on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'*

'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them.'

*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.*

*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."*

The last book in our Bible has often been a source of confusion and conflict among believers. We either make speculative and detailed charts of events of the "end times", or we avoid Revelation and retreat into the safety of the gospels and the epistles. Either approach is not helpful. Sometimes language fails to describe the indescribable so John uses symbols, images and picture-language. Revelation is a pastoral letter to a persecuted Church about the glory and victory of the risen Christ that stretches our imagination and senses. Revelation reminds us that history has a final purpose: the triumph of God over evil. This book was written for the encouragement of persecuted first century Christians, and every generation of believers, to

avoid compromise with evil. God works behind the scenes of history to bring his people safely home. God always has his faithful people, no matter how evil the world may become. John's vision offers hope to those who persevere and stand firm in Christ. Never give up your faith in Jesus!

It seems in chapter 13 that Satan might win, but the triumph of God in chapter 14 is God's answer. A vision of the Church in glory reveals that God and his Messiah are powerful, victorious and in control. Conflict is over for God's people. What a contrast! We turn from the dragon standing on the sand to the "Lamb", John's favourite title of Christ, who stands on firm ground. The mood changes from earthly persecution and martyrdom, to the safety and security of heaven itself. "Mount Zion" is the heavenly Jerusalem, the place of God's presence (Hebrews 12:22). As Paul puts it, God has *"seated us in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus"* (Eph. 2:6). The evil number 666 is replaced by the heavenly number of 144,000. The mark of the beast has been replaced by the name of the Lamb and the Father on the foreheads of the redeemed who belong to God. Instead of proud blaspheming voices, we hear a waterfall, thunder and an orchestra of harpists, with a new song of celebration and praise, that others cannot share. One day, our sorrows will be changed into songs! Imagine the music of heaven! Harps were the instruments of the Levitical priests in Temple worship.

This is a priestly people who sing the song of redemption. Here is an encouraging message for God's people who have *"patient endurance and who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus"* (12). Heaven is a main idea in the NT (John 14:1-3; 2 Cor. 5:1). Revelation 14 is an assurance that God cares for his own and finally will take them to glory. Those who enjoy this new future, and enter into the joys of the age to come, are those who are loyal to the Lamb. Jesus invited his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him; the call of Revelation is much the same, that is, steadfastness. The number of 144,000 people from chapter seven is a symbol for the Church, the full number of the people of God. However, some see this group as being Jewish martyrs. Believers are described as: redeemed by Christ ("blameless"); truthful and faithful in lifestyle; willing to follow Jesus to death if need be; the *"first fruits"*, from *"every nation, tribe, language and people"* (6). 'First fruits' implies a harvest. In ancient Israel, the first crops harvested were dedicated to God. The Church is the *"firstfruits of all he created"* (James 1:18).

How are we to explain the difficulties of verse four? The description *"did not defile themselves with women, for they remained virgins"* is a metaphor for the spiritual purity and integrity of all believers, not a reference to male celibates. The Bible does not argue for celibacy over marriage (Hebrews 13:4). Symbolic language should not be understood literally. Verse four refers to the OT metaphor of sexual purity, symbolising loyalty to God and the rejection of false gods. The image of marriage is used in both the OT and the NT to describe God's relationship with his people (Hosea 2:19-20; Eph. 5:26-32; 2 Cor. 11:2). All believers are the "bride" of Christ: *"For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready"* (Revelation 19:7). James compares a believer's friendship with the world to adultery (4:4).

Judgment is announced by three angels and then carried out by four more angels, who represent God, as Creator of the universe, with a call to faithfulness and a warning of judgment. To worship anything other than God is idolatry. Some people are uncomfortable with the idea of God's judgment but humanity has a deep longing for justice and restitution. The first angel announced the *"eternal gospel"* of salvation through faith in Christ. The Church has a message of "good news", of light in the midst of darkness, of hope in the midst of despair, and of life for those who respond. The gospel of Christ is for everyone. God the Redeemer is also the Judge. Even at this time in history, as final judgment is announced, God longs for people to repent: *"God our Saviour wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth"* (1 Tim. 2:3-4). In order to avoid eternal loss God made the supreme sacrifice: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). If God longs for people to return, if he grieves over their loss, surely, we should use every opportunity to proclaim the gospel.

John assumes that everyone worships something. There is a choice to be made between two stark alternatives: either *"fear God and give him glory"* (7) or the idolatrous *"worship of the beast and his image"*

(9-11). If people will not repent, then judgment inevitably follows. Those who delight in judgment do not have the compassion of Christ who wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). Those who have chosen the way of the beast, rather than persevered in following the Lamb, bring about their own destruction. Judgment is something we bring on ourselves by our own actions: *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son”* (John 3:17-18). The gospel is both positive and negative. It is good news to those who respond to it but judgment to those who refuse it. Any sincere person following any religion cannot have eternal life with God. Sincerity does not save; only personal faith in Jesus can save.

Unless a person believes in Jesus the Messiah, he or she remains under God’s judgment: *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them”* (John 3:36). This is both a warning to the godless and an encouragement to God’s faithful suffering people. Whether as an individual, or as a church, or as a government, there is a moral law and principle of responsibility in human affairs: we reap what we sow! However, notice the message of judgment in this chapter includes the good news of God’s grace. The *“eternal gospel”* is introduced by an angel *“flying in mid-air”* (6), that is, everyone can see and hear the invitation, and ends with the *“rest”* (13) that is found only in Jesus. Here is reassurance when any believer dies: *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them”* (13). Paul assures all believers that their work in the Lord is not *“in vain”* (1 Cor. 15:58). The work that Christians do for God will bring results that last forever. Their eternal security and reward are guaranteed.

Despite persecution and suffering, everything done in the Lord’s name will one day be rewarded: For those who are being unjustly persecuted and condemned, it is wonderful to know that at the right time God will judge the evil oppressors of his people: *“This means that God’s holy people must endure persecution patiently and remain faithful”* (12 NLT). The secret to perseverance is trust and obedience. Trust God to give you the patience to endure even the small trials you face daily. The understanding of God’s ultimate triumph can encourage believers to remain hard-working and faithful in service, and steadfast in their faith.

For the first time we meet Babylon (8). The double *“Fallen!”* emphasizes certainty. Human pride is humbled. Ancient Babylon exiled God’s people; it was the place of captivity hated by the Jewish people (Psalm 137). Babylon begins with Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), the model of human arrogance and independence from God. In Revelation, Babylon is God’s name for the world system of the *“beast”* in rebellion against God. It is a symbol of evil, especially idolatry, immorality and the persecution of God’s people. It was also a code word for contemporary Rome (1 Peter 5:13). When John wrote Revelation, Rome was the pagan power with *“dominion over the kings of the earth”* (17:18) that oppressed Christ’s people (17:6). Yet Revelation’s *“Babylon”* transcends Rome, since its fall awaits the end of history (17:1; 16:19). Babylon the prostitute with *“the maddening wine of her adulteries”* represents false worship; the world’s allure of material prosperity and godless pleasure, seducing the careless into adultery i.e., idolatry against God.

In Genesis the question is asked, *“Will not the Judge of all the earth do, right?”* (18:25). Now God and his people will be vindicated. Sickle and harvest are metaphors for the last judgment: *“As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”* (Mark 4:29). Jesus used the metaphor of harvest by angels to illustrate a spiritual truth: wheat would be gathered in; weeds would be burned (Matt. 13:24-30). John sees the triumphant Christ preparing to return in judgment. The golden crown symbolises victory. A crowned figure, *“like a son of man”* (14), an obvious reference to Daniel 7:13, sits on a cloud with a sharp sickle in his hand, surveying all that lies before him. John uses two images of harvest: one of grain (14-15) and the other of grapes (19) with two themes: the gathering of God’s people from every nation: *“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”* (Matt. 24:31); and the judgment that is coming on Babylon and God’s enemies.

The trampling of grapes is an OT image of judgment. Isaiah prophesied a royal figure, the Messiah, whose clothes are stained with his own blood, his sacrificial death: *"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. It was for me the day of vengeance"* (Isaiah 63:2-4). God's final judgment on human sin is a harvest of justice. Harvest is an OT symbol of judgment: *"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 3:13) Workers trampled ripe grapes into juice with their feet. God is pictured as sending his reapers into the harvest field and to the winepress of judgment, for the nations are ripe for judgment; their wickedness is great and filled to overflowing. No longer will evil triumph. No longer will it be covered up, or seem fascinating or attractive, or be confused with goodness. No longer will it be admired, glamourised or trivialised.

God's judgment will be just, thorough and complete. "Drinking the cup" (8) is an OT image of God's anger (Jer. 25:15ff; 51:7ff). Here the wine is undiluted: *"the cup of his wrath poured full strength"* (10). Images like *"tormented with burning sulphur"* and eternally the *"smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever"*, (Isaiah 34:8-10) upset some people. How can a God of love allow such things? However, God's love is a holy love, not one based on sentimentality; he must deal with sin justly. The destiny of the wicked is similarly described in the OT in God's destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19:24) and Ezekiel's prophecy against Gog (38:22). God repeatedly warns sinners and gives them an opportunity to repent. If people persist in their sins, even after God sends judgments and warnings, they have only themselves to blame.

The Bible insists that there is a proper time and place for God's vengeance, for without it many evils would never be righted, and there would be no moral government in the universe. God allows the seeds of evil to grow until they are ripe, and then he judges justly: *"The sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."* (Genesis 15:16). Israel's exodus from Egypt and the destruction of the Canaanites, was the outworking of God's justice in history. God's retribution is the calling to account of those who have oppressed others and apparently got away with it. God will judge everyone, including his own people: *"It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Hebrews 10:30-31). Images of harvest illustrate final judgment. The harvest is the climax. When Jesus was on earth, he saw the world as a harvest field of salvation. However, at the end of the age humanity is ripe for judgment (15), as the day of redemption has passed. Paul urges: *"Now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation"* (2 Cor. 6:2). Humanity is divided into two camps, and no one can belong to both at the same time.

If the grain harvest symbolises the ingathering of the faithful, the second image is more serious. Grapes are cut from the vine and taken to the winepress to allow the juice to be extracted. This is a picture of judgment at the end of the age. The grapes symbolize the winepress of God's wrath against evil throughout the entire earth and the destruction of all the wicked. Part of the good news is the final destruction of evil. The strange phrase *"the maddening wine"* (8) has a parallel with the *"wine of God's fury"* (10). If one drinks of the wine of idolatry, he will also drink of the wine of rejection by God. To reject God ultimately will bring rejection by him. If you allow yourself to be seduced by the lies of Babylon, you will get what you deserve. This is another way of saying "People reap what they sow" (Galatians 6:7; Hosea 8:7). Or as Paul puts it three times, God gives people over to the consequences of their decisions (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

Chapter 14 ends with a symbolic prophesy of the horrendous judgment of the wicked: *"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"*. OT prophets used the image of blood-red wine juice to describe the bloodshed of war (Isa. 63:1ff; Joel 3:13). Here the wicked drown in a river of their own blood! Jesus died outside the city of Jerusalem, so judgment is outside the city as well. On his return, Jesus *"treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty"* (Revelation 19:15). The number four represents the earth; forty is symbolic of hardship. So, the symbolic number 1600 (40x40) may signify the complete judgment of the entire earth.

God asks each generation the same question: “Caesar or the crucified Lord?” It matters how we decide, and it matters for all eternity. How important it is to make the right choices in this life! They may not be big choices, but each one helps to shape our character and, in the end, our destiny. We need to take daily steps to identify with the Lamb and his followers. Then we can, by God’s grace, be part of the harvest of the redeemed. Today God is speaking in grace and mercy; one day he will speak in anger and judgment.

APPLICATION TO DAILY LIFE

1. Study the 144,000 as a model of discipleship (verses 1-5). How do they show us how to follow Jesus?
2. In many parts of the world, Christians are suffering because of their faith. In your group, pray for the faithfulness and steadfastness of our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ.