

God's Final Message and Earth's Final Harvest

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Revelation 14

God has always sent a message to prepare people for significant events that affect their eternal destiny. When the world was going to be destroyed by water, God sent Noah to warn the people and urge them to enter the ark of safety. When Jesus was about to take up His ministry on earth as the promised Messiah, God sent John the Baptist with a message of repentance to prepare the way. God sent Jonah with a message to the people of Nineveh—"Repent or your city will be destroyed in forty days!" And the people repented. They responded to Jonah's message, and their city was spared. Every time there has been a major event affecting people's spiritual destiny, God has had a message to prepare them to meet it by His grace. It would be strange, then, if God did not have a special message for earth's last generation that was uniquely designed to meet the challenges they face.

The three angels here in Revelation 14 proclaim messages of the greatest significance. They are God's final appeal to the inhabitants of earth. The beast is demanding worship; everyone must make a decision. That is the context in which God speaks to earth through the three angels.

Just before His crucifixion, Jesus cried out with tears in His voice:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing (Matthew 23:37).

That is the emotion God is feeling as He sends these urgent messages to earth. So many times His Spirit has pled with men and women to turn to Him and be saved. Now the end is fast approaching. Satan is enraged against God's people. The beast power is demanding worship. People must decide where they stand. And God is doing everything He can to encourage them to come to Him. He has promised to be with them to the very

end (Matthew 28:20). He is looking ahead to the time when the 144,000 will stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion. He wants everyone possible to be among that group.

Throughout history God has allowed sin to go on for only so long before His judgments fall. Although He has created us with the freedom of choice, He is sovereign. Our choices can never supersede His overall plan for this world. Sin and rebellion have their limits.

Let's look at each of these three messages.

The Message of the First Angel

I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue and people—saying with a loud voice, “Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (Revelation 14:6, 7).

Here is a message that is urgent—the angel is flying in midheaven. It is an eternal, or everlasting, message—the angel has the everlasting gospel. And it is universal—it is to be proclaimed to every person on earth. A message that is urgent, eternal, and universal must be incredibly relevant and important for an end-time generation.

Notice what this first angel is preaching. This first angel has the everlasting gospel to preach to those living on earth. He is not preaching some new gospel. The angel doesn't try to shape the gospel to meet the current whims or fads of society. The angel preaches a gospel that is everlasting. It is the same gospel that Paul and the other apostles preached in the first century. It is the same gospel that Luther preached in the Reformation. It is the same gospel that the Bible has been teaching since the beginning. The beauty of the gospel is that it appeals to the hearts and minds of every generation. Society may change, but the deepest needs of our fundamental lives remain essentially the same.

At the end of time the fundamental need of people everywhere is to hear the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no path to salvation except

through the cross. So the foundation of God's threefold appeal to earth in the last days is the everlasting gospel.

The angel fleshes out the meaning of that gospel for the end time with four points that he emphasizes.

1. *Fear God.* Now this doesn't mean that we should be afraid of God! This means that we should revere God and respect Him. It's referring to the awe and reverence that we should feel when we come into God's presence. The beast is demanding worship based on fear of being killed if one doesn't obey. That isn't the fear that God wants us to have. We show our respect and love by following Him and being loyal to Him.

2. *Give glory to Him.* What can we possibly do to give glory to God? He is the King of the universe. How can we do anything to add to His glory? We can give glory to Him by living for Him. We glorify God by allowing Him to demonstrate His grace and power in our lives.

3. *Worship Him who made heaven and earth.* Here we get to the issue that is paramount at the end of time—worship. Revelation 13 has set up the crisis facing this last generation—worship the beast or worship God. Be marked by the beast or sealed by God. That is the choice. God deserves our worship, because He made us. He is the Creator.

Creation speaks of our value in the sight of God. It speaks of our worth to Him. We are not alone in the universe. We are not simply some speck of cosmic dust. God created us! We did not simply evolve; we are not a genetic accident. Jesus is worthy of our worship, because He both created us and redeemed us. Creation is at the heart of all true worship.

4. *The hour of God's judgment has come.* We have seen that judgment began in heaven at the end of Daniel's 2,300-day (year) prophecy which closed in 1844. God's last-day message includes a focus on this judgment that is determining the eternal destiny of every person on earth. When the judgment is finished, Jesus will come.

In the judgment, all wrongs will be made right. Righteousness will triumph over evil. The powers of hell will be defeated, and God's name will be vindicated. Injustice will not have the last word; God will. The entire universe will worship the One who loves them with an unfathomable love.

The Message of the Second Angel

Another angel followed, saying, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication” (verse 8).

Because Babylon took God’s people captive in Old Testament times, it became a symbol of the enemies of God and His truth. In Revelation Babylon is a symbol of false religion in the last days (Revelation 17:1-6). Babylon epitomizes self-centered arrogance and human pride. In Daniel 4:30, the king of Babylon arrogantly boasts, “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built?” Babylon represents the proud achievements of humanity. It is a symbol of human works, not God’s grace—a symbol of human traditions, not God’s commandments.

The second angel announces the fall of Babylon. At the time of the second angel’s message, apostate Christianity seems ascendant. All the world will wonder after the beast and worship it—except for those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Revelation 13:3, 8). It has power to kill those who refuse to worship it. But at the height of its power, the angel announces Babylon’s fall. It falls precisely because it attempts to make men and women “drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication” (Revelation 14:8). Spiritual fornication is unfaithfulness to God.

Two whole chapters (chapters 17 and 18) deal with the fall of Babylon, and we will examine the details when we come to those chapters. However, we should note one verse of chapter 18. John says, “I heard another voice from heaven saying, ‘Come out of her [Babylon], my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues’ ” (Revelation 18:4). God is calling His people to come out of Babylon before she falls. God is calling His people to leave false religions behind and stand for truth.

The Message of the Third Angel

Then a third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or

on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name”
(Revelation 14:9-11).

These verses are among the most severe and fearful to be found in God’s Word. God is merciful, but He is also just. He is a God of truth, and in these verses He tells it like it is. He can save to the uttermost, but those who refuse to accept His salvation will suffer the results of their choice. On the one hand is the wine of the wrath of Babylon’s fornication. On the other hand is the wine of the wrath of God’s indignation against sin. Again, it comes down to an issue of worship. The first angel urges us to worship the Creator. The third angel warns of the terrible consequences of worshipping the beast.

At its very heart, the mark of the beast exalts the human above the divine. It places humanity’s word above God’s Word. It attempts to replace the commandments of God with human decrees. It leads to giving glory to humans rather than to God.

In the third angel’s message, drinking the “wine of the wrath of God” is defined as being “tormented with fire and brimstone” forever and ever (verses 10, 11). Does this mean that sinners will burn eternally in hellfire? Many sincere Christians would answer, “Yes.” They believe the Bible teaches that sinners will be tormented in the fires of hell for all eternity. They point to texts such as this one here in Revelation 14.

Other sincere Christians believe that the fires of hell will go out once sinners have been burned up and destroyed forever. They point out that if sinners continue to suffer throughout eternity, sin will never be eradicated from the universe. Yet the Bible says God will make an utter end to sin and it will never rise up again (Nahum 1:9). They point to Revelation 21:3, 4 which declares there will be no more pain, sorrow, or crying after Jesus returns, which certainly could not be the case should sinners continue to be tormented eternally.

How, then, are we to explain Revelation 14:10, 11 which speaks of the smoke of the torment of the lost ascending “forever and ever”?

The Bible often uses the term, “forever” referring to things which have an end. See, for example, Exodus 21:6 and Deuteronomy 15:17 where a slave who chose to remain with his master rather than going free could go through a procedure after which the slave would serve his master “forever.” The meaning, of course, is that the slave would serve his master as long as he lived. We use the word, “forever,” in the same way. We say, “I will love you forever.” We don’t mean *eternally*; we mean *as long as we live*. We say, “I’ll remember that day forever,” meaning *as long as we live*. Given the many texts in the Bible teaching that hell will have an end and that sinners will be completely destroyed, we must understand such texts as Revelation 14:10, 11 as meaning that sinners will be burned in hell fire until they are burned up—not throughout the unending ages of eternity.

At the close of the three-fold message, John writes:

Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the
commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Revelation 14:12).

God’s last-day, three-fold message to the world comes to a climax in Revelation 14:7. Here, John describes a group of grace-filled, end-time believers who “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” Rather than worship the beast, God’s faith-filled people keep His commandments.

Those who heed the messages of these three angels and turn away from Babylon and its false teachings are commended for two things—their obedience and their faith. They keep the commandments of God and they have the faith of Jesus. They are patiently waiting for Jesus to return and keeping His commandments while they wait. They have the faith of Jesus—both faith in Jesus and the faith that Jesus gives. This combination of faith and obedience is the key to a successful Christian life. Faith and obedience go hand in hand to build a relationship with the Lord that will stand up to the threats of the beast.

Looking at those who overcome, John says, “Here is the patience of the saints.” God’s people have been patiently watching for Jesus to come ever since He went back to heaven.

Earth’s Final Harvest

The third section of Revelation 14 deals with earth’s final harvest. The chapter begins with the 144,000 standing on Mount Zion in heaven (verses 1-5). The next section takes up the three-fold message that prepares them to stand there (verses 6-13). And this final section deals with the event for which the 144,000 have been preparing—earth’s final harvest (verses 14-20).

The harvest depicts the conclusion of the great controversy. There are actually two harvests brought to view in these verses—the harvest of the saved (verses 14-16) and the harvest of the lost (verses 17-20).

Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and on the cloud sat One like the Son of Man, having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, “Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” So He who sat on the cloud thrust in His sickle on the earth and the earth was reaped (Revelation 14:14-16).

The harvest symbolizes the end of the world when the final destiny of every person on earth is made manifest. Jesus told a parable about the harvest.

Another parable He put forth to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way” (Matthew 13:24, 25).

When the wheat and the weeds both begin to spring up, his servants asked if they should uproot the weeds. The master replied,

Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn” (verse 30).

Jesus explained to His disciples the symbolism of the parable. The man who sowed good seed in his field represents Jesus Himself. The wheat represents the saved; the tares represent the lost. The reapers are the angels, and the harvest is the end of the world (verses 37-40). This is much the same symbolism that Revelation 14 uses to depict the final harvest of earth. However, instead of using tares, or weeds, to represent the lost, Revelation 14 uses a harvest of grapes.

At the end of time the righteous will be gathered into God’s kingdom in a joyous harvest. Matthew pictures that harvest in these words:

Then all the tribes of earth . . . will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to another (Matthew 24:30, 31).

And the apostle Paul describes it like this:

The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17).

How different is the harvest of the lost! Revelation pictures that harvest as a harvest of grapes.

So the angel thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress (Revelation 14:19, 20).

When grapes are harvested for their juice they are put in a press. In Bible times, the grapes were trampled by human feet to extract the juice. Revelation pictures the grape juice as blood coming out of the winepress in a graphic illustration of the truth that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Notice that in both the harvest of the saved and the harvest of the lost, it is specifically stated that harvest is “ripe” (verses 15, 18). God has borne long with sin on the earth. He has given every man and woman ample opportunity to accept His salvation. Each person has made his or her irrevocable choice. Not until the harvest is “fully ripe” does God thrust in His sickle and reap. Those who are in the harvest of the saved stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion. Those who are lost are thrown into “the great winepress of the wrath of God” (Revelation 14:19).