

Understanding Revelation Part 23
God Will Settle the Score
Revelation 14:14-20

This week I came across a letter that was written to Probe Ministries. It reads, in part:

I write to you feeling perturbed about God. At times I really wonder the question of His existence. I would appreciate if you could enlighten me in the area of trusting in God. I find it hard to trust Him nowadays. I trust in Him to provide financially, but instead I receive more financial problems. I see sinners who are ruthless and despicable earning tons of money, curse Him with the very breath He gave them. What a joke! His children suffered in hunger and He dared to claim that He will not allowed the righteous to suffer hunger. Sometimes when I see how He blessed those rogues, I told myself where is His logic? Of course He hopes that by showing mercy, these crooks will repent, then how about His children who are suffering hunger? You mean God enjoys people cursing Him so that He could bless them? Then I think His children will begin to curse and swear at Him.

I poured my hope on Him in several areas of my life. He said that whoever called upon the name of the Lord shall not be put to shame. I trusted Him time and time again in some areas of my life such as my career, my family problems etc. But none of them came true for me. Instead my feeling right now that He is a cheat and I feel more ashamed trusting Him. What a joke!

The writer of that letter is certainly not the first to express those kinds of thoughts. In fact all of Psalm 73 is a similar lament which is pretty much summarized by these two verses: (Ps 73:12-13) – *Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.*

But we see, both the Psalmist and John received a very clear answer to their questions about why the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous suffer.

Let's quickly review where we're at in our journey.

This is the third vision in chapter 14 – each of them representing one of four sub-scenes in which we see God at work through his agents.

At the beginning of the chapter we saw the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel serving God. Then last week we saw God's angels proclaiming the eternal gospel.

This week we see two harvests that are also carried out by the angels of God, and by Jesus.

Before we go any further I need to point out that there are some commentators who view both of these harvests as picturing the same event from two different perspectives or who view both harvests as picturing the wrath of God poured out on the ungodly.

But the context and other supporting Scriptures support the idea that these are actually two different harvests that are being carried out at the same time, but with two different groups of people and two completely different outcomes.

I think that will be easier for us to see if we look at these two harvests in reverse order. So let's begin with the second harvest that is pictured here.

THE HARVEST OF THE UNRIGHTEOUS (vv. 17-20)

1. The harvester – the angel of God

There are two angels involved in this harvest.

The first angel comes from the temple in heaven with a sharp sickle in his hand.

The fact that he comes from the temple shows that he is carrying out this harvest under the sovereign authority of God the Father.

The second angel is described as the one having authority over fire and comes from the altar.

As we've seen consistently in our journey, fire is frequently used as a picture of judgment.

This angel serves as a messenger from God and relays the command from God to the angel with the sickle to begin the harvest.

2. The crop – ripe grapes

Throughout the Old Testament prophets God's final judgment associated with the Day of the Lord is often pictured as a harvest of ripe fruit.

In Amos chapter 8 God showed Amos a basket of ripe fruit as a picture that those who had rebelled against Him were ripe for judgment.

And then in Joel, we find this: (Joel 3:13) – *Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great.*

This is exactly the picture that we see here in Revelation 14.

Because the crop of grapes is ripe, a sickle is going to be taken to that harvest, which leads us

directly to the next element of the harvest of the unrighteous:

3. The instrument – a sharp sickle

I'm certainly not an expert on farming, but even I know that grapes are not normally harvested with a sickle.

The grapes must be picked by hand.

Using a sickle would not only damage the fruit itself, but it would also result in damage and destruction to the vines that bear the fruit.

That seems to be what Jesus was referring to when he walked through a vineyard with his disciples just a matter of hours before His crucifixion.

He began His discourse with these words: (John 15:1) - I am the true vine...

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel was frequently pictured as a vine.

For instance, in Isaiah 5, God describes how He lovingly prepared the ground and planted a vineyard and He clearly identifies that vineyard as the house of Israel: (Isaiah 5:7) – *For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel...*

But Jesus identifies Himself as the “true vine.”

In a sense, the vineyard of Israel was only a picture of the Messiah, who would come from Israel and who would be the true vine.

And Jesus used this picture of a vine to illustrate the necessity of placing our faith in Him alone as the means by which we might have a relationship with Him and an abundant life that bears fruit for Him: (John 15:5) – *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*

But with His very next words, Jesus also pointed out that those who chose not to abide in Him would have their branches cut off and face judgment: (John 15:6) - *If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*

That is exactly the harvest that is being described here in Revelation 14 as the sharp sickle is taken to the vines.

4. The fate of those harvested – the wrath of God

This is certainly consistent with what we saw last week, when we determined that the final destiny of the citizens of Babylon is to face the wrath of God.

And that wrath is described here in very explicit terms.

In the ancient world the wine press was a large basin where men would tread grapes.

They would hold on to ropes above them and stomp the grapes with their feet. The juice would run into containers on the sides of the large basin.

God uses that here as a picture of the tremendous bloodshed that is going to accompany His wrath. The bloodshed will be so great that it will reach the height of the horse's bridle – about 4 feet - for a distance of 1,600 stadia – about 180 to 200 miles.

I'm certainly no mathematician, but even if all the bodies of the troops that will be massed to fight against Jesus at the Battle of Armageddon were piled on the ground, they probably wouldn't occupy a space four feet deep and 200 miles long.

But I think another Old Testament prophecy which pictures this same event helps us to understand what is going on here:

(Isaiah 63:1-4) – *Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? “It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save.” Why is your apparel red, and your garments like his who treads in the winepress? “I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood spattered on my garments, and stained all my apparel. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year of redemption had come.*

This is obviously a prophecy of Jesus coming to execute God's judgment as He treads the winepress.

And you'll notice here that the blood spatters His garments.

Perhaps that is what is going on here in Revelation.

The blood is being spattered to a height of 4 feet over this large area as God executes His judgment.

But regardless of exactly what is being pictured here, there is absolutely no doubt that this bloodshed will be unlike anything ever seen in the history of the world up until that point.

There is certainly enough of a picture here to understand that we don't want to be part of that harvest.

Interestingly enough, when the Psalmist sought out God, God revealed to Him that even though the wicked seem to prosper here on this earth, they will one day have to answer for their sin and face the wrath of God:

(Psalm 73:16-19) – *But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!*

Not a pretty picture at all, is it?

But fortunately, for those who have placed their faith in Jesus and who abide in Him as the true vine, there is another harvest for us.

THE HARVEST OF THE RIGHTEOUS (vv. 14-16)

1. The harvester – Jesus

This harvest is carried out by “one like a son of man” who is seated on a cloud.

Although some commentators try to make the case that this is just another angel, both in the Book of Daniel as well as earlier in the Book of Revelation, the phrase “one like a son of man” is clearly associated with Jesus: (Daniel 7:13) – *I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.*

Jesus is also pictured here as coming with the clouds, which is also consistent with what we see here in Revelation 14.

(Revelation 1:13) – *in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest*

The biggest problem that some commentators have is the fact that an angel appears to be giving a command to Jesus here.

But the angel here is merely a messenger who is coming from the temple and bringing a message from God the Father to Jesus.

This is exactly what we would expect based on Jesus’ own words: (Matthew 24:26) – *But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.*

Since only the Father knows the day and hour of the harvest, when that time comes, He sends His angel to communicate that to Jesus.

Jesus has a golden crown on His head.

The crown is the stephanos crown, which, is a picture of victory.

Jesus is in the process of carrying out His final victory over His enemies.

2. The crop – grain

Although it may not be apparent from a casual reading of the text, the Greek word used in verse 15 that is translated “fully ripe” indicates that this section must be referring to a grain harvest rather than the grape harvest pictured at the end of the chapter.

This is very significant because it allows us to determine the nature of this harvest based on the words of Jesus when he told the parable of the weeds as recorded in (Matthew 13:37-43) – *37 He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, 42 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.*

Jesus foretold of the end of ages when the grain will be harvested and the wheat, which represents Christ followers, will be separated from the weeds, which represents His enemies.

And Jesus will use His angels as His agents in that process, which is completely consistent with what we see here in Revelation 14.

The idea that Jesus is harvesting His followers here is also hinted at earlier in this chapter when the 144,000 are referred to as firstfruits.

When we looked at that passage a couple of weeks ago we determined that was an indication that there was a larger harvest still to come.

3. The instrument – a sharp sickle

When grain is harvested a sharp sickle is needed.

A dull sickle would merely knock the grain down or damage it without actually harvesting it.

So the fact that Jesus uses a sharp sickle here is actually a picture of God’s mercy.

When the time comes for the harvest of Jesus’ followers, the harvest is going to be swift and precise.

4. The fate of the harvested – not revealed

Unlike the picture of the grape harvest where the fate of those who are harvested is revealed, this particular passage is silent about the fate of the righteous who are harvested.

But, as we saw last week, we know that the final destiny of those who experience this harvest is eternal rest in the presence of Jesus.

That is exactly what God revealed to the Psalmist at the end of (Ps 73:23-26) – *Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward*

you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

So in this passage we find the answer to the questions asked by both the person who wrote the letter to Probe Ministries and by the Psalmist in Psalm 73.

Even though it may appear right now that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, one day God is going to settle the score and every person will get exactly what they deserve.

Those who are righteous in God's sight based on their faith in Jesus will be harvested by Him and will enjoy eternal rest in His presence.

But for those who have not committed their lives to Jesus and are therefore not righteous in God's sight, they will be harvested by God's angels and be judged by Him in a horrific bloody slaughter.

HOW THEN SHOULD WE LIVE?

In light of this information, how are we to live our lives on a daily basis?

How are we to survive in a world where the wicked often prosper and the righteous often suffer?

It seems to me that we would do well to follow the counsel of the Psalmist that we just read, since he had to deal with those very same issues.

1. Continually spend time with God

It was not until the Psalmist entered into worship in the sanctuary that He was able to see things from God's perspective and to understand the final destiny of the wicked.

And it was by continuing to remain in the presence of God that he was able to be sustained as he lived in the midst of a world that is often unfair. Notice his words in verse 23: *Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.*

It was only by continually being with God that the Psalmist was able to be sustained in his life.

That is an important lesson for us.

It's not enough to just come to church on Sunday and get a dose of God and expect that is going to sustain us throughout the week.

We need to continually enter into His presence through His Word, through prayer and through spending time with others who are doing the very same thing.

2. Be guided by God's counsel

The Psalmist continues with these words: *You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.*

There is no shortage of places where we can go to get guidance for living our lives.

Just for the fun of it this week, I went to Amazon.com and clicked on the "self-help" section.

That search came up with 112,772 books that I could purchase that would provide me with some kind of guidance in some area of my life.

And then there are Dr. Phil and Oprah and a whole slew of radio and TV talk show hosts dispensing advice as well.

And it seems like every one of these people has their own take on how to live in a world where evil often prospers – in fact many of them would even counsel us to join right in with those people and make sure we get our fair share.

But at the very beginning of the Psalms, we are counseled by God to take exactly the opposite approach:

(Psalm 1:1-2) - *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.*

We are guided by God's counsel when we delight in His law and meditate on it day and night.

There is no guarantee that doing that will make our life any easier or more comfortable in our lives here on earth.

But it will prepare us for an eternity spent in the presence of Jesus.

That leads us directly to the third thing we need to do:

3. Keep my focus on eternal things

(Psalm 73:28 -29) – *Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

When we realize what we have in Jesus, then there is nothing else on earth that could ever begin to measure up to that.

So rather than focusing on all the temporary things I don't have here in this world, I need to focus on that which I have eternally in Jesus.

That is exactly the point Paul is making to the Colossian church: **(Colossians 3:2)** – *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*

When I do those three things: continually spend time with God, be guided by His counsel and keep my focus on eternal things, it will inevitably lead to one final application:

4. Develop urgency in sharing my faith with others

As we've progressed through the Book of Revelation, this is the one thing that keeps coming to my mind over and over.

As we clearly see the fate of those who have not committed their lives to Jesus more clearly each week, my heart breaks for those people.

When I understand the terrible, everlasting fate that they face, it motivates me to do everything in my power to make sure that they have an opportunity to respond to the eternal gospel of Jesus.

God will settle the score some day, and I want to do absolutely everything I can to make sure that the people that God brings into my life won't face that terrible and final judgment of God.