

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

LESSON 9

The previous two chapters showed a terrifying scene of the great dragon (Satan) and the two powerful beasts he calls to help war against the saints of God. Unable to destroy the Christ, he turns his anger against the church and the saints that are continually being added. Satan is allowed a brief period to persecute the righteous, but the church still remains protected spiritually. As we have seen before in the Revelation, the visions often move back and forth from Satan's oppression and persecution to the victory of the saints and God's righteous judgments against evil. In chapter 14, the scene turns from the persecution of Christians on earth to a picture of spiritual encouragement and strength in heaven. Chapter 15 introduces us to the final judgments of God, as we see seven angels who are given the seven bowls of God's wrath, prepared to be poured out on the earth in chapter 16.

Chapter 14

As John's attention is turned back to heaven, he sees the righteous Lamb standing on Mount Zion, along with 144,000 saints who have the name of Jesus and also the Father written on their foreheads. Jehovah's Witnesses believe these are the true redeemed ones, the only ones to be chosen from the beginning to inhabit heaven (the other non-predestined righteous ones will be allowed to live on a glorified earth). Some scholars feel this is a picture of the end of time with the redeemed saints in heaven. Most suggest this is a scene of the redeemed standing secure with Jesus on Mount Zion. Zion was the highest elevation in Jerusalem, the pinnacle of God's city. Later, it stood symbolically for the place of refuge and strength because the dwelling place of God (the temple) was located there (Ps. 9:11, 20:2, 48:2-3). Messianic prophecy (Ps.2:6) noted that God would place His anointed one, the messianic King upon His holy hill of Zion. Although judgment would rage in the world all around it, Zion would escape (Joel 2:32), and many people would come to the mountain of Jehovah to learn of His ways, drawn by the law going forth out of Zion (Isa. 2:2 ff). Jesus is the cornerstone laid in Zion for a foundation, assuring the saints they will be secure forever (Ro. 9:33; I Peter

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

2:6). The Hebrew writer combines the prophecies of Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-8 when he writes, *"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, and to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel"* (Heb. 12:22-24). Christians on earth come to Mount Zion in the sense of belonging to the spiritual kingdom of the church, yet to be delivered to the Father. Still, their citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20) and they still seek *"the city which is to come"* (Heb. 13:14). John's vision here in verse one is of the heavenly city of Mount Zion to which saints come who have been redeemed from this life.

The 144,000 are seen standing with the Lamb. These are the same as those so numbered in 7:3-8, where they represented all of God's saints still on the earth and surrounded by Satan and his forces. This is not a final scene when the kingdom resides only in heaven, but the Zion of the Messiah to which the saints have come to be protected by God. Although still facing persecution, they are standing with Jesus as if they were dwelling with their savior on Mount Zion in heaven. They had previously been sealed by God, so as never to be hurt spiritually again. Although they still faced physical persecution, it would have no effect on their relationship with Jesus. This scene conveys the idea of security, permanent protection, and eternal victory for the church, because the Lamb stays with them constantly.

John now hears a powerful voice emanate from heaven, likely the numberless multitude coming out from the great ongoing tribulation. It is described as that of many waters (majesty of a great multitude praising God), great thunder (great power and force), and many harpers playing harps (the melody of songs of praise to God and the Lamb). They sing a new song before the host of heaven. It is new because it comes from their new experience. This was no longer just the song of Moses, but also the song of the Lamb. No one can learn this song unless they have been taken out of the world and redeemed by Jesus' blood. The 144,000 (the complete number of saints) learn this great song and sing with the host of heaven. Verse 4 further describes these protected ones on Mount Zion as being virgins, and not having defiled themselves with women. This

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

is not referring to physical chastity and sexual immorality, but rather to those who have kept themselves from the spiritual fornication of false pagan worship. They have not become unfaithful to Jesus in prostituting their faith by worshiping the beast (II Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:27). Verses 4 and 5 go on to describe three other characteristics they possess. They follow their Savior wherever He goes. Like real sheep, they listen only to the voice of their Shepherd and follow Him only, knowing that only He will protect them and provide for them. They refuse to worship Caesar and the pleasures of the world, and have always remained faithful to the Lord's commandments (Matt. 7:21-23; Heb. 5:8-9; I Peter 2:21-23). Of all in the world, only these 144,000 have been redeemed from among men by Jesus blood, being the first fruits to God and Jesus. Under the Old Law, the first fruits of the harvest were offered to God to acknowledge all that the people owned belonged to Jehovah. In like fashion, these redeemed ones have given themselves as a sacrificial offering. They have separated themselves from the sin of the world in order to be living sacrifices for God (Rom. 12:1-2; Gal. 2:20). Finally, in their mouths was found no guile. They rejected the lies of Satan by rejecting the religious falsehood of the two beasts. By staying within the light of Jesus, they remain cleansed of their sins (I John 1:7).

The next vision reveals a series of three angels which proclaim the downfall of the beastly Roman Empire. The first, flying in mid-heaven, possesses the everlasting gospel to be preached to all the world. Those of the Latter Day Saints would claim that this is an already fulfilled prophecy of the time when an angel flew over the state of New York and left golden tablets to be found by Joseph Smith, who deciphered the writing and founded Mormonism. In reality, this angel is symbolic of the saints who continue to preach the gospel to all the world (Col. 1:23). There is also an additional message of urgency from this angel to reverence God, noting that "*the hour of His judgment is come*" (14:7). This is not final judgment, but rather the judgment of the beast which will soon be upon the world.

A second angel is now seen, proclaiming "*Fallen, fallen is Babylon, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.*" This is the first of 6 times that Babylon is mentioned in the Revelation. The 'great city', or Rome, is compared to Babylon, the capital city of that great empire of the past. I Peter 5:13 mentions "*the church that is at*

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

Babylon” as a reference the New Testament Babylon, or Rome. This comparison is also clearly stated in the Sibylline Oracles. This proclamation of doom is a quote from Isaiah 21:9, where the prophet states, *“Babylon is fallen, is fallen”*. The wine here described is the intoxicating influence of Rome’s power and wealth and immorality. This analogy of drunken lustfulness and spiritual adultery is the same as that found in Jeremiah 51:7. Through force and coercion, she has enticed and seduced the nations to follow her in her evil ways, causing them to share in Rome’s guilt and demise. The wording here of Rome’s destruction is that of an event which has *already occurred*, as the victory is so certain that the outcome is announced before the battle is even fought. In this respect, this announcement is similar to Isaiah, as he foretold the end of Babylon about 200 years before its final fall, just like that of Rome predicted in the Revelation.

A third angel appears, warning that anyone who worships the beast and his image (makes the Roman Empire his idol and also worships the emperor) and receives his mark (a sign of spiritual compromise) shall be made to drink of the wine of the wrath of God. The unrighteous drank freely of the corruption of Rome, so God will prepare for them a drink of eternal destruction. The concept of drinking the wine of God’s wrath is found in Jeremiah: *“Take this cup of the wine of wrath at my hand, and cause the nations, to whom I send thee, to drink it”* (Jer.25:15, 27-29; 51:7). The ancients often drank wine diluted with water or spices for everyday purposes, but the wine of the wrath of God will be poured out full strength for the sinful, not diluted with mercy. If anyone forsakes God and worships the world (including Rome and the emperor), God will forsake him.

Those who drink of God’s wrath will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the Lamb and the holy angels (and also the redeemed of the Lamb). Verse 11 also states that the *“smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest day and night.”* This is in direct contradiction with the Latter Day Saints, who believe there is no hell for the unrepentant, only the grave. The punishment of fire and brimstone is the same judgment pronounced on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:28; Luke 17:29). The same fate was also reserved for Assyria, Edom, and Gog, who, like Sodom and Gomorrah, *“are set forth as an example, suffering the punishment of eternal fire”* (Jude 7). The unrighteous will spend their terrifying future with their father, the devil, as stated by Jesus in Luke 16:23 & 28 and Matthew 18: 8ff and 25:41 & 46. Further, this will be witnessed in

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

full view of heaven, not something 'done in a corner.' Whereas those with God's seal suffered humiliation, hardship, and even martyrdom in this life, those with the seal of the beast and Satan will suffer a fate much worse than death. Given this horrible alternative to eternal life with the Father, John reminds his hearers that the perseverance of the saints will keep them secure, if they will but remain faithful. One could also substitute patience or steadfastness for the word perseverance. Jesus reminded His disciples, " *By your patience (endurance), you shall win your souls*" (Luke 21:19). Jesus also commended the church at Philadelphia, saying: " *Because you have kept the word of My perseverance (patience), I also will keep you from the hour of testing...*" (Rev. 3:10). The patience of the saints was rooted in accepting the charge to serve the Lord no matter what followed, even if it meant accepting captivity/ prison or death/ martyrdom.

John now hears a voice from heaven that tells him to write: " *Blessed (blessedly happy) are the dead who die in the Lord from now on! Yes, that they may rest (be refreshed) from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.*" This charge to write is in the form of a beatitude, and as we learned from Lesson One, this is the second one of seven found in the Revelation. This is not saying it is good or happy to die, but it is blessed to be found protected and comforted by the Lord when one faces death. There is a reminder that the works of the righteous follow them after death until judgment, just as the evil done by the unrighteous also follow them. Our good works remain in the minds of those still struggling to serve in the world, but also they are remembered by God. On the last day, every man will be judged according to his works.

What we next see is a vision of two harvests on the earth: one suggesting a grain harvest, and one suggesting a grape harvest. Whether these are talking about the same thing (a complete harvest of all souls) or separate things (the first a harvest of the righteous and the second a harvest of the unrighteous) is not fully clear. The Old Testament frequently used the symbols of harvest and vintage to show God's divine judgment (Joel 3:13; Isa. 63:1-6; Jer. 51:33). We know that the concept of a harvest has previously been used to include both the righteous and unrighteous in a single gathering (Matt. 13:30). As we look on, there is one like a Son of man sitting on a white cloud (white being the color of holiness and purity, and the cloud frequently symbolizing judgment in scripture). He has a golden

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

crown (*stephanos*) and a sharp sickle or scythe in His hand. It is the description of Jesus. In chapter 6:1f, He rode forth to conquer the world with a bow, but now He holds an instrument of harvesting. An angel (the fourth of seven) now comes out of the heavenly temple as God's messenger and cries to the Son of man to thrust His sickle to the earth and reap, for the harvest is ripe. The Greek word used here for "ripe" is *xeraino* which literally means "withered away" or "dried up", a time when growth has ended. There is no more waiting for repentance, and righteous judgment is at hand. The Son of man then reaps the earth with His sickle. Some scholars believe this first sweep of the sickle by the Christ is a harvest of just the righteous saints (Matt. 3:12, 9:37-38; John 4:35-38), as distinguished from the following harvest of grapes, which are clearly subject to God's wrath.

A fifth angel comes out of the temple in heaven, also having a sharp sickle for harvesting. He is followed by a sixth angel, one who had power over fire. We now remember this angel from chapter 8 (verse 5), who cast hot coals from the altar of incense down to the earth and caused thunder and lightning and earthquakes. This angel cries to the first one to thrust his sickle to the earth and gather the "*clusters of the vine of the earth, as the grapes are fully ripe (xeraino)*". Thus, their wickedness was full/ complete. As this harvest is complete, these grapes are then cast into the great winepress of God's wrath. The words of Joel 3:13 will echo in the ears of the wicked: "*Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest/ vintage is ripe; come, tread ye; for the winepress is full, the vats overflow, for their wickedness is great.*" This vine of the earth stands in direct contrast to the true vine of Jesus Christ (John 15:1-8). The vintage of the winepress is trodden outside the city. This is not the 'great city' of Rome, but likely referring to the holy city/ New Jerusalem/ church. This is a spiritual destruction of the wicked, not really referring to the physical fall of Rome. As the sin-offerings were burned outside of the camp of the Israelites, and as Jesus was a sin-offering who suffered "*without the gate*" (Heb. 13:11f), it is only fitting that those who reject Christ suffer outside the city as well.

The immensity of the carnage here described nearly defies belief. The vintage from the winepress is so great as to create a river of blood 1600 furlongs long (about 200 miles) to the depth of a horse's bridle. Premillennialists believe this describes the carnage of a literal Battle of Armageddon in the Valley of Jezreel, fought by millions of soldiers in the future. We will see in a later lesson

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

the folly of this thinking. Some suggest that the number 1600 is built from **4** (number of the world) X **4** X **10** (earthly completeness) X **10**. Regardless, we see the awful destruction which awaits the unrighteous. We remember back in verse 10 that these unrighteous ones with the beast's mark would be made to drink of the wine of God's wrath. As they are the grapes themselves, the horror of their fate lies in the fact that the wine of this drink is made of their own blood.

What is the destruction that John is seeing? It cannot be the end of the world, as the saints on earth are still present in the narrative, more judgment is destined for the earth in the next chapter, and Satan, Death, and Hades are still free to wreak havoc on mankind. A graphic description of the true final end of time is seen in II Peter 3:7-10. This current scene shows the final end of the Roman Empire. It is the righteous judgment on a spiritual harlot who has corrupted the world and persecuted God's people. This reaping of the wicked has taken place by the preaching of the gospel, which causes judgment to fall on all who reject God's word. It has happened to nations before, according to scripture, and may yet happen again.

Chapter 15

The previous three chapters explained the spiritual reasons behind the battle between the church/ saints and the beast, culminating in the wicked being thrown into the winepress of God's wrath. This next chapter expands on that previously described judgment. From this point on in the Revelation, we see a stepwise presentation of the conclusion of Rome's destruction, leading ultimately to the final judgment of all. Chapters 15 and 16 show us the seven bowls of God's final wrath. Chapters 17 and 18 describe the final destruction of Rome. Chapters 19 through 20:10 show Christ's praise for leading the righteous to victory. Chapters 20:11 through 22 reveal the final judgment and the beauty of the New Heaven and New Earth, which will continue forever.

As we saw seven heavenly beings in chapter 14 (Jesus and 6 angels) carry out God's will, we now see another seven angels who have been given seven last plagues to be cast down to earth, as God's wrath will then be ended. We see a "sea of glass mingled with fire", where victorious saints stand. We have seen this

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

sea before in Rev. 4:6, where it stood for the transcendence of God, who previously could not be approached by men. Most likely the fire symbolizes the trials and suffering the victorious saints have endured as they overcame the beast, his image, and the number of his name (1 Peter 1:7; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:2f). They hold harps of God and sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. These are both songs of victory. Moses and the Israelites sang of their victory after being delivered from the hand of the Egyptians and crossing the Red Sea (Ex. 15:1). The song of the Lamb is sung by the saints because they have been delivered from the beast and false prophet. We see a continual praise to God for His continual deliverance from any worldly force that would seek to harm us spiritually. Both the saved of the Old Testament and those in the New are here united, as they all can relate to God's saving power.

We now hear the words of the song of Moses and the Lamb. It is a song of praise, glorifying the Lord as the only One who is holy and the only One who is worthy of worship. We see various quotes from the wording of the Psalms and Jeremiah, and this song is similar to those sung on chapter 4 and 5. It concludes with the understanding that a time will come when *“every knee should bow”* and *“every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Phil.2:10-11). Following this, John sees the heavenly temple (sanctuary, or *naos*) opened. The seven angels introduced in verse 1, who had been given seven plagues, again appear directly from God's presence and are now dressed in priestly garments. They are given seven bowls filled with God's wrath. Whereas previously the seven seals **revealed** and the seven trumpets **announced** and **warned**, now the seven bowls **execute** God's will. That the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the majesty and glory of God and His power is likely a sign of God's glory in action, bringing to mind the picture of Mount Sinai filled with fire and engulfed in smoke (Ex. 19:18). The temple was now closed until God completes His judgment against the wicked beast and his followers. Now, as again at the end of time, anyone for whom the judgment of God is prepared will not be allowed to enter the sanctuary, as the time to repent was past (Matt. 25:10-13).