

Good News, Bad News, You Choose

Revelation 14:6-13

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We've looked fairly closely at most of the first half of Revelation. Last week, we moved into the second half. I'm finding that Revelation is kind of exhausting. So, I think we'll wrap up our series on Revelation next week. In this message I want to do a kind of overview and then focus on this section in chapter 14. Then I want us to get to heaven, so next week we'll go to the final two chapters of the book and look at the new heaven and new earth.

Right before the section we're reading today is chapter 13, which may be one of the most quoted and most diversely interpreted passages of Revelation. That's where we read about "the beast" and the number 666. The various judgments and plagues that run throughout the book are difficult. That's partly because we don't like to think about judgment. But if God is *holy love*, we have to expect that God won't tolerate sin, evil, and injustice. God will finally bring about justice and judgment on sin and all evil. That's a big part of the book of Revelation.

To help us have a better perspective on this middle section, let's look again at an overview of the entire book. In chapters 1-3, the references are to events, people, and places of the time when Revelation was written—the late first century in the Roman province of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). At the same time, the principles, commendations, and warnings in the letters have value for the church of all time. Putting those two observations together gives us a clue for interpreting the whole book. Revelation shows Christ and his church struggling against the enemies of Christ and his church. The first half of the book (1-11) describes the struggle on earth, picturing the church as it's persecuted by the world. The second half of the book (12-22) gives us the deeper spiritual background of this struggle as it shows the church being persecuted by the dragon and its helpers (A. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* 223, 226).

A few weeks ago, I gave you a handout that shows the outline of the book as being like a spiral, with each loop consisting of a series of visions:

Seven messages to the churches (1-3)
Seven seals (4-7)
Seven trumpets (8-11)
Unnumbered visions (12-15)
Seven Plagues (15-19)
More unnumbered visions (19-22)

At the end of each cycle there are visions celebrating the triumph of God (4:1-11; 7:1-17; 11:15-19; 15:1-4; 19:1-10; 21:1-22:5—Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* 39).

Chapters 12-14 are a unit, a distinct section. There's some overlap of the sections in the book. The end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 15 could be part of this section. 11:19 and 15:5 both show the temple in heaven open, revealing the ark of the covenant. This section shows the faithfulness and justice of God in delivering his people, judging those who rebel, and bringing evil to an end.

We've seen that chapter 12 shows Satan seeking to destroy God's Son and, failing to do that, seeking to destroy "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17). The devil is overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of the Christians' testimony.

In chapter 13, we meet the dragon's helpers, Satan's associates. There's a beast from the sea and a beast from the land. For John, the first beast symbolized the Roman Empire, including its demand for worship of the emperor and its persecution of those who didn't comply. The second beast, later called the "false prophet", symbolized the local officials who enforced emperor worship in each city or region.

But these beasts depict threats that can't be limited to one place and time. These visions give readers a way to discern the presence of evil and they sound "a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (13:10). Instead of asking when the beast will appear, it may be better to ask when the beast's presence *isn't* apparent. When is idolatry *not* a threat? When do followers of the Lamb *not* experience pressures to give up our commitments? The call to endure with faith, to persevere, isn't just a

message for a generation living in the first century or at the end of history. It's a message for all generations that are confronted with idolatry and violence (Koester 135).

Following the introduction of the fearsome beasts, chapter 14 shows the Lamb (Jesus) standing on Mount Zion (the heavenly city). With him are 144,000 people who have the names of Jesus and the Father on their foreheads. There's the sound of tremendous praise. This group is probably the same group of 144,000 described in chapter seven. They represent all of God's redeemed people. Earlier they were sealed with the seal of the living God. The "mark of the beast" in chapter 13 is an imitation and counterfeit of God's seal on his servants. Here in chapter 14 God's people are described as those who haven't defiled themselves sexually. This may refer to the spiritual defilement of idol worship. In the Old Testament, Israel's idolatry was often compared to adultery. And, in Revelation, idolatry is compared to sexual immorality.

Following this heavenly vision is an interlude that sums up the call to repent and the warnings of judgment that run throughout the book. Then comes a picture of the end and the final judgment, depicted as a harvest. Eugene Peterson sees the outline of chapter 14 addressing Worship, Preaching, and Holy Living (*Reversed Thunder* 128-34).

Now let's look closer at this interlude, the "preaching" section. It has three angels announcing messages. One writer calls these messages "Good News, Bad News, You Choose" (Robert Mulholland, *Revelation. Journey Through the Bible*, Vol. 16, pp. 82-83).

The first angel has an eternal gospel to proclaim: "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

This message is the call that goes out to the whole world. It's the most basic expression of faith—to believe in and honor God as Creator. Remember the song to God the Creator in chapter four. This is the message Paul and Barnabas preached to some pagans who were trying to worship them as gods. "We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them" (Acts 14:15).

Gospel means “good news.” This is good news to the people of God because God’s judgment means that they will be delivered and finally granted justice. But God’s judgment is bad news for those who rebel against God and resist him—who persist in their rebellion and resistance.

God has set a time when he will judge the world. He’ll put things right. He’ll reward his faithful people and sentence those who rebel against him or ignore him. The call to repent, to turn from sin and idolatry to God, is urgent. The judgment is sure. It is coming. We need to be ready. We ignore it at the risk of our lives, our souls. Too many people on the eve of judgment are easy-going, indifferent, and unconcerned.

I once read an illustration of this. Imagine an artist sitting on top of a rock a ways off shore so he can get a better view of the village and its surroundings that he’s painting. He’s unaware that the tide is surging at the base of the rock. He’s so absorbed in his painting that he fails to pay attention to the crashing waves and he doesn’t respond to the calls of warning that people are shouting to him. He just sits and sits, absorbed in his painting. At last, the waves will overwhelm him (William Hendricksen, *More than Conquerors* 153).

A second angel follows and says, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon Great, which made all the nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her immorality.” Historic Babylon was the great enemy of the people of God. Babylon’s rulers and people were powerful and arrogant and had no regard for the God of Israel. They crushed Jerusalem and carried many of the people into exile. All through the messages of the OT prophets, Babylon represents both God’s judgment on his people for their sin and the evil that God would deliver his people from.

For John and his churches, Babylon symbolized Rome. It was the seductive and destructive expression of the rebellious order, the world system. John’s vision describes Babylon/Rome as a prostitute in chapter 17. Its destruction and fall are described in chapter 18 and that leads to the “Hallelujah Chorus” in chapter 19.

Rome actually fell and was conquered. But the worldly system it embodied lives on. It finds expression in governments, cultures, and societies all through history. God calls people to come out of Fallen

Babylon and become citizens of New Jerusalem. You have to be in one or the other. In the end, everyone will share in either the blessedness of New Jerusalem or the destruction of Fallen Babylon. Those who drink Babylon's wine are those who join in rebelling against God, worshiping other gods, living in the luxury of injustice. Though that wine seems intoxicating, it's really the wine of wrath and judgment.

Babylon is fallen. God will bring it down in a final show of its fallenness. Those who are attached to it, entangled in it, will go down with it.

A third angel warns that all who worship the beast and receive its mark on the forehead or hand will drink the wine of God's wrath. Again, those who drink Babylon's wine will be forced to drink the wine of God's judgment and wrath.

The beast is another aspect of Fallen Babylon, another embodiment of the rebellion. In chapter seven God's people are sealed to protect them from God's wrath poured out on the world. In chapter 13, the beast's people are marked to avoid the beast's persecution of God's people.

"Receiving the mark of the beast" means "belonging to the beast and worshiping the beast." For John and his churches, it meant bowing before an image of the emperor and receiving a certificate stating that they had shown this loyalty. It was more a political act than a religious one. The Romans didn't care whom you worshiped as long as you first acknowledged "Caesar is lord." But Christians couldn't do that. For us, Jesus alone is Lord. Roman coins of the time also bore the emperor's image and titles claiming to be lord and god.

Why the forehead and the right hand? The forehead represents thought, what guides your thinking, your inner direction and commitments. Do you have God's seal on your forehead? Or do you have the beast's mark? Who do you belong to? What shapes your thinking and commitments?

The right hand symbolizes action, deeds, work. Your actions reflect and express what you think about, what gives you direction, what you're committed to.

[T]he entire human citizenship of Fallen Babylon is shaped by the inner orientation of the beast's blasphemy of God (forehead). This inner orientation actualizes itself in the practical activities of human life and society (right hand). Human existence and participation in Fallen Babylon becomes the incarnation of the beast. (Mulholland 76)

There may yet be a future incarnation of the beast that will force people to make this choice more dramatically and openly. But worrying about "666" on license plates or credit cards, or trying to identify certain individuals as the antichrist misses the main point here. The main point is the choice we're called to make right now. It's easier to resist literal branding of a mark on our body or the implanting of a computer chip or whatever. It's harder to recognize where we're being loyal to the rebellion and to root those things out of our lives. The question is where our basic commitment lies and whether we have a character that conforms to the world or to Jesus Christ.

There's a strong warning in this section. Those who worship the beast and receive its mark will drink the cup of God's wrath. They suffer God's glory and holiness and love burning against them in their sin and rebellion. I don't think there's literal burning sulfur in hell. But this image shows the torment and horror of being unprotected in the presence of God's blazing holiness. God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). Those who try to hide from God's presence or those who presume to stand before God in their sin and plead their own case experience God's holy love as a consuming fire. Others depend on Jesus to put them right with God. They're described here as the saints who endure patiently, and keep the commands of God and the faith of Jesus. They experience God's holy love as a purifying and refining fire. When they die in the Lord, they're blessed and find rest from their labors.

To worship the beast means torment. Those who are attached to this world will perish with the world. To "die in the Lord" is to be guaranteed eternal rest. "This is the main issue in life and in death: to whom or what have you given worship? (Scotty Smith, *Unveiled Hope* 160).

In the last analysis, it is always a choice between the power that operates through inflicting suffering, that is, the power of the beast, and the power that operates through accepting [and redeeming] suffering, namely the power of the Lamb. (Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code 77*)

Is the news of God's judgment on sin, unbelief, injustice, and rebellion good news or bad news for you? You choose.

With Billy Graham's death last week, I've been thinking about his influence. Those of us over a certain age remember watching his services on TV or hearing him on the radio or reading some of his writings. I got to hear him in person in Kansas City a couple of times—once when I was five (I barely remember that) and once when I was in high school. Sometime around when I was 11, I went to the Baptist Church with a friend. They showed one of the films produced by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (I don't remember which one). After the film, the pastor gave an invitation. My friend asked me, "Have you ever been saved?" I wasn't sure what that meant, so I didn't respond that night. But I started thinking and asking questions. Some months later, through that experience and several other people who influenced me, and the work of God's Spirit, I invited Jesus to come into my heart. Not long after that, I was baptized and joined the United Methodist Church my family belonged to.

One hallmark of Billy Graham's preaching was that he always called for a decision. I have a set of books called *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, published in the early 70s. It includes seven of Billy Graham's sermons. Whatever topic he was preaching on, he concluded with the offer of salvation and the call to come to Christ. Here's the conclusion of a sermon called *Saved or Lost?* preached in Houston in November 1965:

My mind says he must be the Son of God. My emotions watch him on the cross dying and suffering and bleeding, and my heart goes out and I say, "I can love a man like that. I could follow a man like that," but I'm not really saved...until my will makes the final decision.

[He gives the example of his wedding, saying he wasn't really married until he said, "I will" and the pastor pronounced them husband and wife.]

When you come to Jesus Christ in this crusade you come publicly to say "I will" to Christ. You say, "I will receive him as Savior, but I also receive him as Lord." Simple to...stand...and say, "I will receive Christ into my heart," sounds idiotic and simple and moronic, and it is, because the Bible says that the preaching of the cross is foolishness, it's idiocy to those who are lost, but to those of us who are saved it is the power of God unto salvation.

[He tells the story of the great theologian Karl Barth, who was asked what truth had come to mean the most to him over the years. Barth replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."]

That's it. Simple, but profound. You come to Jesus Christ in simplicity, just as you are, saying, "God, I have sinned, I have failed, I'm sorry. I come to your cross tonight and say, 'I will.' I want my sins forgiven, I want to know I am going to heaven. I want a new life. I want to start a new course. I want to wake up tomorrow morning on Thanksgiving Day and thank him for saving me tonight and changing my life and forgiving my sins." (Volume 12, p. 311)

Have you made that decision? Do you choose the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ? If not, will you make that choice today? If you have, will you share the good news with someone else?