

The Amazing Acts of God

Revelation 14:1-15:4

Our text this morning is one of the most thrilling and inspiring passages in all of Scripture. I am convinced that if we would keep a view of these scenes continually in our mind, it would drive away our fears, purify our minds, and invigorate our prayers. There is almost nothing more empowering, in the midst of a great conflict, than the news of certain and impending victory. And that's what Jesus is telling us in these verses.

The thrill of chapter 14 is that it is Christ's response to the horrors of chapters 12-13. In those chapters we saw the reality of the kingdom evil. It is led by the great Red Dragon, the Devil, Satan. He has been cast to earth where he makes war on those who belong to Christ. In chapter 13, he is joined by the two beasts, one from the sea and one from the earth. They represent the political, social, and religious powers of darkness. They wield their demonic influence through deception and coercion. Jesus wants us to understand the reality of the powers of darkness.

As we noted last week, spiritual darkness is descending over this globe. Christian persecution is rising all over the world. And here at home, we simply have to acknowledge that the powers of deception and coercion are gaining the upper hand. We live in a post-Christian society and the hordes of hell are determined to overthrow every vestige of the rule and truth of Almighty God. The spirit of this age is a demonic spirit and is unapologetically at war with the living God.

Our culture is being deceived with the deepest lie – the lie that human freedom is possible only by the assertion of individual, human will over all reality, and even over God himself. As Rod Dreher points out in a recent article, everything being promoted by our society today – radical individual liberty, sexual autonomy, the deconstruction of family – is driven by the insistence that we will be free only when all the chains to the full expression of individual will are cast aside.¹ As Justice Kennedy infamously opined, "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence..." Someone has called that statement the "John 3:16 of the modern spirit."

We are living in the reality of Revelation 13. We are face to face with the beasts. We are in a battle with "the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). But the story doesn't end with chapter 13! Revelation 14 is the announcement from the throne of King Jesus, that no matter how the Devil may

¹ https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/america-nervous-breakdown/?mc_cid=73eca2413f&mc_eid=835018cc31

rage, no matter how those who dwell on earth rebel, Jesus Christ has conquered and those who belong to him need not fear. In the immortal words of Luther's hymn:

"Though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us.
We will not fear for God has willed His truth to triumph through us!"

The text is divided naturally into 4 scenes, each beginning with the words "Then I looked/saw." You'll see that phrase in 14:1, 14:6, 14:14, and 15:1. In these 4 scenes John is shown the victory of Jesus Christ revealed in judgements upon the earth, and the triumphant singing of his saints in heaven.

Scene 1 – The King and His People (14:1-5)

In direct contrast and response to the Devil's war against the church in chapter 13, chapter 14 begins with a vision of Christ's glorious victory. John sees the Lamb, King Jesus Himself, standing on Mount Zion.

Mount Zion was the mount upon which King David built the city of Jerusalem and established his throne. The temple of God was eventually built there, and so Mount Zion came to be called God's holy mountain, his dwelling place.

Here it refers not to the literal mountain in Israel, but the heavenly dwelling place and throne room of King Jesus.

Jesus is "standing" there – the Lamb of God reigning over the earth. But he is not alone! With him there are 144,000 who "had his name and his Father's name written on their forehead." We first read about the 144,000 in chapter 7. The number stands for all the saints of God throughout history: 12 tribes of Israel representing the Old Testament church multiplied by the 12 apostles representing the New Testament church, again multiplied by 1,000 – a vast number which no one can count. They have been sealed with the name of Christ Jesus and the Father. Claimed by God, belonging to God, protected by God. And here, standing victoriously in the presence of God.

The evidence of their exhilaration and triumphant joy is their song. In the context of war, songs are the prerogative of the conquerors! John hears the thunderous roar of God's victorious warriors as they unite in a glorious song before the throne of God. If you have any sense of the majesty and honor and magnificence of this scene, it will make your heart hurt. There is not a choir in the universe as glorious as this.

I recently read a sportswriter trying to describe what it is like to be at the Big House in Ann Arbor when Michigan scores a touchdown. He said when the band breaks into "Hail to the

Victors Valiant" and 110,00 voices burst into joyful song, it's the "biggest choir on earth." That may be – but it utterly pales in every way with the thunderous chorus of heaven!

In verse 3 we are told that they are singing a "new song" and "no one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth."

A "new song", in the Bible, is a song that recounts specific saving acts of God, as those saving acts are revealed.

The song of the 144,000 is a song only they know, because only those who have **experienced** the great redemption of God in Christ can sing about it! In other words, holy angels and lost sinners can't sing this song because they have never experienced the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ.

- They can never sing, in truth, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."
- They can never sing, "My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more."
- They can't sing, "Amazing love, how can it be that thou, my God, should'st die for me."

Holy angels and lost sinners can't sing these songs because it isn't their truth, their experience. These are songs only the redeemed saints of God can sing. This is **their** story. This is **their** song.

And John emphasizes the distinct nature and identity of these choir members. Notice the repeated emphasis of "these" in verses 4-5:

*14:4-5 It is **these** who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is **these** who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. **These** have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, and in **their** mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.*

The saints of God are distinguished from the world of men by devotion and truth.

- "Not defiled themselves with women" This does not mean that sexual activity is inherently defiling. Sex between a husband and wife is God-glorifying and good. This is a reference to the Old Testament law which required men who were about to enter into holy warfare to consecrate themselves to God by refraining from sexual activity with their wives. It was a sign of whole-hearted and physical devotion to God and God's battle. It said, in a tangible way, that there is something more valuable, more important, than sex – even godly sex. The point here is that the saints of God are those who fought

the fight of faith with devotion; they presented their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1).

- *“In their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless”* In the context of the deception of the beasts and a world that lies and believes in lies, the saints of God are marked by truth.

These are **evidences** of their identity – not the **basis** of it. In other words, you don’t get to be one of the redeemed by showing a sufficient amount of devotion and integrity. To be redeemed is to be purchased with the blood of Christ. As we will see tonight in the scandalous story of Hosea 3, Jesus doesn’t purchase the best and brightest. He redeems the immoral and corrupt. That’s the glory of grace! But what we see here is the **power** of grace! If you are redeemed, your life will increasingly be marked by devotion to Christ and a passion to follow him, to walk in his truth, no matter the cost. Notice, *“It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.”* *“Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee.”*

Scene 2 – The Message of the Angels (14:6-12)

In verses 6-12, we are shown that as the victory of King Jesus is being celebrated in heaven, it is being proclaimed on earth. John sees three angels, God’s messengers, fly over the earth with a message for this world.

The first angel proclaims *“an eternal gospel”* for *“those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.”*

14:7 And he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

The *“good news”* is a call to worship! Those who have bowed down to the beast and worshiped the dragon are invited and commanded to repent of their idolatry and worship the Lord alone. It is a message of great importance and necessary urgency, for *“the hour of his judgement has come.”*

The gospel message is an urgent call to repentance and worship. The hour of judgment is near. Now is the time to confess your sin and give God glory. Now is the time to be saved. But the time is drawing to a close. That’s the message of the second angel.

14:8 Another angel, a second, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.”

If Mount Zion stands for the holy city of God, Babylon stands for the unholy city of man. Babylon was the great pagan city of the Assyrians. Here it stands for all the kingdoms and principalities of this world in their opposition to God. Babylon is the spiritual city of mankind, the headquarters of the Devil's reign on earth. It is defined by its perversion. We will study the concept of Babylon in more detail in chapter 18.

Here, it is the **message** that matters: though the city of man seems to be doing remarkably well, though the powers of hell are actively at work – so certain and final is the victory of Jesus Christ over this world that Babylon can already be said to be fallen. The city of man is a dead city walking. And when the final judgment comes, it will be devastating!

That's the message of the third angel. It is a promise from God that those who refuse to worship God and give him glory, those who worship the beast and receive his bestial mark, will experience the full fury of the wrath of God. In verse 10 we are told,

14:10 He also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

There are those who say that this is simply symbolic language, that God would never truly torment people with fire and sulfur. It may well be symbolic language – but be assured that the reality will not be less a torment than the symbol. In other words, the symbol is not hyperbole. Jesus wants this world to understand that hell will a place of awful, unending torment.

14:11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night...

The idea of people suffering in eternal torment is deeply troubling to many people. And I don't say that to ridicule. I've wrestled with this. Can it be just for God to punish people forever with torment? What about those who never had a chance to hear the gospel? Hell seems too much, too punitive, too awful a thing for God to do.

But is it possible that the reason hell seems too punitive to us is only because the glory of God is too small to us? It's one thing to say that we can't imagine how hell could be a just and righteous response to sin. It's another thing to say that because we can't imagine it, it can't be possible. We are told in Scripture that God, in the glory of his perfections, is far beyond our ability to conceive. Isn't it likely then, given the inestimable glory of God, that hell could actually be a just response to those who desecrate that glory?

It is precisely the glory of God as God that is on the line here. The great sin of man is the refusal to worship God as God. In the end, people do not go to hell for their indiscretions, perversions and deceptions. They go to hell for their idolatry. Notice in verse 11, the punishment of hell is for **“these worshipers of the beast and its image.”** They refused to honor God and gave their worship and allegiance to the beast instead. God is worthy of his worship. This is the fundamental tenet of Scripture and the driving principle behind both the salvation and judgment of sinners in Christ!

Those who refuse to give glory to God in this life will spend eternity with no rest. No peace. No shelter. And no relief.

In direct contrast, Jesus speaks a message of great comfort and rest for the redeemed:

14:13a And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”

In the midst of a revelation concerning judgement, Jesus wants to encourage his saints. He commands John specifically, “write this down.” Jesus wants his bride to know that those who die in the Lord are really, truly, and forever blest. They rest from their labors. They enjoy the great shalom, the peace of God.

To further emphasize the point, the Spirit adds his testimony:

14:13b “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

Sinclair Ferguson makes the excellent point that their deeds **follow** them – they do not **precede** them. In other words, our deeds do not open the doors of heaven for us. No one will enter eternal rest by being “good enough.” Rather, the door of heaven is opened because Jesus was good enough. The only dead who find rest are those who die “in the Lord,” by virtue of HIS saving work. But our deeds will follow us there. When we enter the presence of the Lord, we will find that the Lord has recorded every act of faith and obedience, every fruit of grace – and he will reward us for them.

Scene 3 – the Reaping of the Earth

On the final day of judgement there will be two harvests: a harvest of grain and of grapes.

The harvest of grain is found in verse 15. It doesn’t say “grain” but the word “ripe” in verse 15 is the word used for a yellow stalk with mature seed – corn, barley, or oats. At the end of the world, Jesus will “reap” his harvest. He will gather all his children to himself.

The harvest of grapes (17-20) is a devastating harvest unto judgment. The word "ripe" here refers to grapes ready to be picked and crushed in the winepress. As the world continues in its idolatry, as men and women continue in their rage against God and their sexual perversions, the earth is slowly, but surely, becoming ripe for judgment. Pornography and gay pride parades look like celebrations of human freedom and autonomy – but they are in fact a ripening process. The spiritual grapes of this world are becoming engorged and swollen with evil, begging to be harvested.

And one day soon, they will be. They are cast into the great winepress of the wrath of God.

And the blood flowed, as high as a horse's bridle for 1,600 stadia. Roughly the length of Israel, from the southern to the northern border. It is a way of describing world-wide judgment. There will be no place to hide from the wrath of the living God. This is the harvest of those who worshiped the beast.

And once again, in direct contrast, we see the victory and joy of the redeemed.

Scene 4 – The Song of the Redeemed

*15:3-4 And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,
"Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy.
All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."*

Again, the song of the saints is a victory song. They "sing the song of Moses," the song Moses and Israel sang when God destroyed the army of Pharaoh in the Red Sea. But now, it's the song of the Lamb – the song the saints sing when Jesus crushed the Devil and his hosts forever. This is the song of heaven!

But it's a song we can sing now. Even in the face of trouble and sorrow. Maybe particularly in the face of trouble and sorrow. I remember well the December of 1983. I was a student at Dordt College and the college community was stunned to hear that Jack Grotenhuis, former student and beloved son of Dr. Dale Grotenhuis, the choir director, had been killed in a motorcycle accident. He was 27 years old with a young wife.

Dr. Grotenhuis was devastated by the loss of his eldest son, a teacher like himself. His wife finally told him to get into his study and turn his grief into something productive, to write a song, a choral piece that could be performed by the Dordt Choir. And so he wrote "The

Song of Triumph," taken directly from Revelation 15:3-4. "Great and marvelous are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty."

How do you sing, "Great and marvelous are your deeds, O Lord God Almighty" in view of the death of your son? Well, he wasn't writing in view of the death of his son. He was writing in view of the life of his son – victorious before the throne of God. Death is conquered. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came and died and rose triumphant over death and hell – and everything will be made new. And no matter what happens in our life, that truth remains. The kingdom of heaven will not be shaken. Jesus reigns. And we are invited, in faith, to sing the song of the Lamb.