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 Revelation 14:14-20
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HARVEST TIME

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Last week after one of the services someone came up to me with a question that was troubling her. Is there a second chance for those who die after rejecting the gospel, after turning their back on the good news of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ? It's a question that many ask. Death brings a finality that is difficult for Americans to accept. This country devotes enormous resources to postponing death, but finally death catches up with all. As has frequently been observed, the mortality rate is 100%, with a couple of exceptions for Enoch and Elijah. Our text last week ended with the beatitude, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on" (Rev 14:13). This was an exhortation to die well, holding on to the Lord Jesus Christ. What of those who do not die well? What of those who die, but not in the Lord? Mormons get around this finality with their baptisms for the dead. Liberal theologians get around it with universalism: since God is love he will surely save everyone. But the Scriptures offer no such comfort. There is a time when God says, "Enough. Time is up." Death is the moment at which God has been saying this until now, but the day is coming when God will say this for both the living and the dead. The time is coming when God will wrap up the world as we currently know it. This is the point which we have now reached in the Book of Revelation, the third and final vision of chapter 14.

The second vision (14:6-13) announced the arrival of this time, as an angel proclaimed that "the hour of his judgment has come" (14:7). This angel was the first of three angels who sequentially proclaimed the three-fold eternal gospel: all humanity owes worship to God the Creator, the kingdoms of this world will fall, and those who refuse to worship God will be judged. The third vision now shows this judgment.

A. The Two Harvests

This third vision of chapter 14 describes two harvests, one of grain the other of grapes. These harvests are presented as two parallel panels. In each panel there are two heavenly beings and the same three actions: John sees a heavenly being holding a sharp sickle; "another angel" emerges from the temple or the altar and calls in a loud voice for the first being to wield his sickle and gather in the harvest for it is ripe; whereupon the first being uses his sickle and the earth is harvested.

There are some differences between the two panels: the first harvester is "one like a son of man" while the second is an angel; the first harvest is of grain, the second of grapes; and we are told what happens with the harvested grapes but not with the grain. But the similarities between the two panels are more extensive than the differences; indeed, the similarities serve to highlight the differences.

This literary device of parallel panels can be used to compare or to contrast, to describe similar or contrasting things. The big question is which purpose is being served here. Are the two harvests the same or are they different? Is the grain harvest the same as the grape har-

vest? This is a matter on which there is considerable disagreement. Commentators I greatly respect are lined up on either side of the debate: some say the harvests are the same, others say they are different. Both sides marshal cogent arguments in support of their position.

This is an issue on which I formerly could not make up my mind—one of several in the book. But over many years of studying this book I have gradually become more decided on most of these issues. This is one of them. I now think that the two harvests are different, that they refer to different sets of people.

Let me advise you to be skeptical of anyone who claims that they have every detail of this book figured out. Revelation is a book that requires humility and caution. Nevertheless, I think that the basic message of Revelation is very clear. It has been said of the Scriptures that they are shallow enough for a lamb to paddle in but deep enough for an elephant to swim in. This is one of the things that makes the study of Scripture so rewarding. There is more than enough to keep the scholar busy his whole life, yet Scripture is also accessible to the new believer. This is certainly true of the book of Revelation. There is a depth sufficient for a lifetime, yet the basic message of the book is abundantly clear if we will but read it well.

1. The Grain Harvest (14:14-16)

I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one "like a son of man" with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested. (Rev 14:14-16 NIV)

The first of the two harvests is the grain harvest. That this is so is indicated by the word used for "ripe": the crop has "dried out," which is true of grain cereals. The harvester is described as one "like a son of man," seated on a white cloud with a golden crown on his head. This is Jesus Christ; we'll return to his description later.

Who is being harvested in the grain harvest? There are three major opinions: the unrighteous, the righteous, or both together with the righteous being separated from the unrighteous. Before I tell you which one I think it is, I need to give you a little explanation of harvest technology. Most people now have no idea how the food on their table is produced. We no longer live on or near farms where we can observe farming methods; farms are so heavily mechanized that these farming methods of old have almost completely disappeared; we purchase our food in packaging that masks its origins; the food itself is heavily-processed, bearing little resemblance to what is harvested.

The Bible is full of agricultural imagery; this imagery conveyed meaning to every generation of readers until our own, but I fear that its meaning is lost to many of us today. Growing up in the rice fields

of Thailand I had the good fortune to see farming in a pre-mechanized age. The rice fields were still prepared with plough and harrow, then planted and harvested by hand.

The manual harvesting of any grain cereal is a three-stage process: reaping, threshing and winnowing. This applies whether it is rice in Thailand or wheat and barley in Old Testament Israel. The first stage is reaping: the stalks of standing grain are cut with a sickle. These cut stalks are gathered into sheaves and left standing in the field to dry. The stubble left in the ground is burnt or ploughed under. The second stage is threshing: the stalks are laid out on the ground on a threshing floor, and hooped animals are driven over the stalks. In Thailand these animals were water buffalo; in Old Testament Israel they were cattle. Sometimes a threshing sledge is used; this is a board with sharp stones or pieces of iron embedded in the bottom that is dragged across the stalks by an animal while someone stands on the board. The sharp edges of the animals' hooves or of the sledge cut the stalks into short pieces, and separates the grain from the stalks and the husks from the kernel. The third stage is winnowing. The threshed grain is thrown up in the air using a pitchfork. Wind blows the light-weight grain husks away as chaff; the not-so-light straw blows just a short distance away to fall at the edge of the threshing floor; and the heavier kernels of grain fall straight down where they accumulate in a pile.

In the Old Testament, which is John's primary source book for his imagery, both threshing and winnowing are used metaphorically for judgment. But neither threshing nor winnowing is mentioned here in John's vision. In contrast to the grape harvest where he sees what happens to the harvested grapes, John does not see what happens to the reaped grain. He sees only the reaping. Reaping is a positive image in the Old Testament; bringing in the harvest was a time for rejoicing. This is one of the reasons I conclude that this grain harvest refers not to judgment on the wicked, nor to separation of the godly from the wicked, but to the ingathering of the saints.

In the first vision (14:1-5), John had seen 144,000 standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion. This is the same group as in chapter 7, where John *heard* them as 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes, enumerated as in a military census, but he *saw* them as an innumerable multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, gathered around the heavenly throne singing praise to God and to the Lamb. They are the saints, "purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb" (14:5). In Old Testament Israel the first portion of the harvest was offered to God as the choicest portion. The firstfruits implied that the rest of the harvest, the ingathering, would follow. The presence of the 144,000 in heaven as the firstfruits anticipates the ingathering of the full harvest.

Here, in the grain harvest, John sees to the end of this age, when the ingathering will be complete. When the harvest is fully gathered in, then and only then will the end come. How many will be in the harvest? Their number is 144,000 from all Israel: it is the complete number (10-cubed) of the people of God (12-squared). It is the fulfillment of all that God started to do with Abraham when he called him from Ur and began to build a new people in a new land with whom he would dwell as God and people. But their number is also a multitude beyond counting, from every nation, tribe, people and language. The people that the Lamb is redeeming unto God is universal. The number 144,000 is expansive not limiting. It does not limit the harvest to a literal 144,000, but implies that the number reaped, the number gathered in, will be extensive, full and complete.

2. The Grape Harvest (14:17-20)

Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe." The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia. (14:17-20)

The second harvest that John sees is the grape harvest. This is another familiar image from the Old Testament. When ripe, grapes were harvested with a small knife, here also called a sickle. The grapes were placed in a winepress, usually a pit carved into the rock. As the grapes were trampled by foot, the juice overflowed, and ran along a small channel to another pit where it was collected in a container.

The grape harvest itself and the drinking of the end-product are positive images in the Old Testament, but the trampling of grapes in the winepress is a negative image of judgment. There is thus near-universal agreement that the second harvest seen here, the vintage, is the gathering of the rebels for final judgment. The winepress is "the great winepress of God's wrath." Just as the wheat harvest looked back to the firstfruits of the first vision, so this winepress looks back to the second vision of chapter 14. Babylon had intoxicated the nations with the wine of her passion, her idolatry (14:8). The worshipers of the beast, who had drunk Babylon's wine of passionate idolatry, would have to drink from God's cup his wine of passionate wrath (14:10). Cup, wine and winepress are all used as metaphors of judgment on the great day of the Lord.

Instead of grape juice overflowing the winepress, it is blood that flows out. So devastating is this judgment that the blood flows deep and far: as deep as the height of horses' bridles, and as far as 1600 stadia. How far is this? As a physical measurement, 1600 stadia is about 184 miles. Therefore, most modern English versions render this as 180 or 200 miles. Of the major translations, only NIV and ESV leave it as 1600 stadia (KJV, NKJV use 1600 furlongs). Some commentators point out that some ancient Jewish writers give the length of Palestine as 1600 stadia, suggesting that judgment extends throughout the land. But I would be very surprised if John is referring to a physical distance. All those translations which render this as 180 or 200 miles have, I think, robbed the text of its meaning. The meaning lies in the number not in the unit. We'll find that the same is true for the dimensions of the New Jerusalem (21:16-17), where again many modern versions rob the text of meaning by translating away the symbolic numbers. Since every other number in the book is symbolic, it seems unlikely that this would be the only number that is not so. What sense can we make of the number? For many years I have been puzzled by this number; I am still somewhat puzzled by it, but I am at least willing to hazard a guess. The number 1600 can be broken down into 40-squared or 4-squared times 10-squared. All three of these numbers have symbolic value in Scripture; but 40 is not used elsewhere in Revelation, whereas both 4 and 10 are used frequently. Four is the number of universality, and ten the number of completeness. I suggest that 1600, which is 4-squared times 10-squared, signifies that this judgment is universal and complete. At the end, no longer will God's judgments be partial.

The judgments unleashed by the seven seals affected a quarter of the earth. The judgments unleashed by the seven trumpets affected a third of the earth. The time is coming when God's judgments will affect all of the earth. No longer will these judgments serve as warnings, as calls to repentance. There will come a time when it will be too late. The final call to repentance had been announced by the first angel with the eternal gospel (14:6-7). The trampling of the grape harvest with the blood flowing to 1600 stadia is a vision of final judgment upon all who refused to heed the final call. It is, therefore, no surprise to find that in the very next verse John sees "seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed" (15:1). These plagues are contained in seven bowls which the angels pour out upon the earth: the seven bowls which affect not a quarter, nor a third, but all the earth. With the pouring out of the seventh bowl, the cry goes up, "It is done!" The end has arrived. The things which must happen have happened.

Note that the harvest field is the same in the two harvests: it is the earth's (grain) harvest and the grapes of the earth's vine that are ripe. The earth's vine stretches throughout the world. Every nation, language, tribe and tongue has been deceived into worshiping that which is false. All the earth-dwellers refuse to worship God. They persist in their rebellion, ignoring God's call to repent and return to him. God's judgment, when it comes, will therefore be just. But before the grape harvest comes the wheat harvest. This, too, encompasses the whole earth. Through his own blood, the Lamb has purchased people from among men to be the people of God, drawn from every nation, language, tribe and tongue. He is turning rebellious earth-dwellers who worship what is not fit to be worshiped into worshippers of God.

To turn around the parable of our Scripture reading (Matt 13:24-43), in Satan's field, which is full of weeds, wheat is springing up on all sides. The seed is God-given, but he uses his saints as the planters and waterers. When God, through Christ and his Spirit, has raised up a full harvest, when the Lamb has finished plundering Satan's kingdom, then the end will come. But not before. Final judgment does not take place until after Christ has finished gathering in a people for God. Because this is what Christ is doing, we can pray that the Lord of the harvest send out workers into his harvest field (Matt 9:37-38; Luke 10:2), for the harvest is plentiful. Missionaries can go out with the confidence that God is sowing his seed throughout the whole world.

B. God and his Harvester

1. The Lord of the Harvest

The first and second angels come out of the temple in heaven, that is they come out of God's presence, to speak on his authority. It is thus God who gives the word for both harvests to take place. It is God alone who decides when the time is up. He is the Lord of both harvests.

The third angel, who called upon the second angel to harvest the grapes, came from the altar. This is the altar under which John saw the martyrs crying out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:10). It is the altar on which the prayers of the saints were offered up to God (8:3). It is the altar from which the censer was filled with fire and hurled upon the earth (8:5). The seven trumpets within time were God's response to the prayers of the saints. The grape harvest at the end of time is also God's response to the prayers of the saints.

At our Lord's instruction we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." His kingdom will come, his will will be done. But this requires the removal of those who want no part in his kingdom. Meanwhile, though, the gates of his kingdom are open to all.

2. The Harvester

We do not see who it is that treads the grapes in the winepress of God's wrath—the action is rendered in the passive, albeit a "divine passive," that is a circumlocution for divine activity. In chapter 19 we learn the identity of the one who "treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty" (19:15). There it is the rider on the white horse, the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is the divine warrior, Christ himself. Thus the one who treads the grapes is the same as the one who reaps the wheat harvest. The one who judges is also the one who saves, and vice versa. Jesus Christ, the Lion-Lamb, is the one through whom God accomplishes both salvation and judgment. Indeed, salvation and judgment are opposite sides of the same coin.

In the second and third visions of chapter 14, John sees a total of seven heavenly beings. Six of these are angels, each described as "another angel." They are seen as two sets of three, between whom is seen one like a son of man. The literary structure thus focuses our attention on this, the central character.

In addition to the sharp sickle in his hand, John sees him as one "like a son of man," seated on a white cloud with a golden crown on his head. This is a reference to Daniel 7, one of the most important chapters of the Old Testament for understanding the imagery of chapters 12–14. In that chapter Daniel saw a succession of four beasts resembling a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a final beast that was terrifying and frightening beyond description. Then Daniel saw God as the Ancient of Days seated upon his throne. Into his presence, "coming with the clouds of heaven," came "one like a son of man." "He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Dan 7:14).

It was explained to Daniel that the four beasts represented four earthly kingdoms; they were beastly perversions of the kingdom idea. In the beginning, God had delegated rule of his earthly kingdom to the human who was in his image (Gen 1:26). But due to rebellion, the earth was ruled by a series of tyrants who were beastly rather than human, who were images of Satan rather than images of God. Daniel was shown that there was coming "one like a son of man," one who would be truly human. He would be a fit ruler of God's eternal kingdom. God's kingdom would be universal and eternal, ruled by one who was truly human. This kingdom would not be the sole possession of the one like a son of man. Daniel was shown that it would also be for the saints of the Most High as their eternal possession (Dan 7:18, 27). Daniel 7, then, is about the collapse of all earthly kingdoms, the inauguration of God's eternal kingdom under the rule of the true king, and the incorporation into that kingdom of the saints of the Most High.

In Revelation 13, the beast whom the dragon uses to exercise his rule on earth is modeled on the four beasts of Daniel 7; he is a combination of all four. He has ten horns and seven heads, for in him seems to be concentrated all power and authority. But the first vision of chapter 14 shows the Lamb standing on Mount Zion. Here, on the heavenly Zion, God has installed his king. There was nothing that the dragon, the beast, the false prophet or Babylon could do

about it. The installation of the king over God's eternal kingdom has two ramifications: the end of all earthly kingdoms, and the incorporation of the saints into the eternal kingdom. This is what the triumphant cry at the seventh trumpet is about: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). That declaration is spelled out for us in symbolic terms in chapters 12–14.

The installation of the Lamb on Mount Zion as king means that both judgment and salvation are at hand. In the sequence of John's visions, the investiture of the Lamb is followed immediately by the proclamation and harvest at the end of this age. But we know that there has been a long gap. God has installed his king, but the full ramifications of that installation in judgment and salvation have not yet been brought to fulfilment. During this time God is expanding his kingdom deep into Satan's territory.

At the end of time God will make all who reject him and rebel against his kingdom drink the cup of his wrath. But in the middle of time, he handed that cup to his own Son. Jesus drank to the dregs the cup of God's wrath. His blood was poured out in the winepress of God's wrath. That blood flows deep and wide to the farthest reaches of the world. God calls upon all men everywhere to repent and enter his kingdom: that's the eternal gospel. Entrance into that kingdom is passage through the blood of the Lamb: that's the gospel of grace. Passage through this blood means death and resurrection, following in the footsteps of the Lamb. Christ is himself the firstfruits of those who rise from the dead (1 Cor 15:20, 23). In raising his Son from the dead, God had in mind not only him, but all who would follow him, the firstfruits, in the ingathering of the full harvest.

Seven, yea ten, times in Revelation, Jesus says to his churches, "I am coming."¹ When he comes, he will do so as both Savior and Judge, as both reaper of the wheat and stomper of the grapes. In the gospel, God calls upon all people to know his Son as Savior before he reveals him as Judge. To Moses on Mount Sinai the Lord revealed himself as a "compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exod 34:6-7). The means he has provided for the forgiveness of sins is the blood of his own Son. But "he does not leave the guilty unpunished." Though his patience is long, he will eventually call "Time!" Those who refuse to know Christ as Savior will know him as Judge.

In Paul's sermon to the Areopagus, the city council of Athens, which was our Scripture reading last week, he told these religious but deluded men, who worshiped man-made images in man-made temples, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). Yes, God has set a day of judgment; there is a day when he will call, "Time." He has appointed a judge, even the Lord Jesus Christ. But this same Judge he has appointed also as Savior, and he invites all people to come and know his Son as Savior before he reveals him as Judge.

In the words of the wonderful hymn by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty sung as our offertory, "'Jesus is Lord'—the cry that echoes through creation."² The installation of God's king on Mount Zion, seen in the first vision (14:1), has ramifications throughout the entire cosmos. Indeed the cry echoes throughout creation. This Lord whom God has installed as King of kings and Lord of lords, is both Savior and Judge. As the final verse reads,

'Jesus is Lord'—a shout of joy, a cry of anguish,
As He returns, and every knee bows low.
Then every eye and every heart will see His glory,
The judge of all will take His children home.

What manner of love God has shown to us in and through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ: that he poured out his judgment upon his own Son, handing him the cup of his wrath; that his blood was trod in the winepress; that we might know him as Savior rather than as Judge; that we might be part of the wheat harvest rather than of the grape harvest. What wondrous love is this that God is reaching deep into Satan's territory, there to sow the seed of his gospel; that the Lamb is turning rebels who worship that which is not fit to be worshiped to worship the only true God; that Jesus is assembling a people from every nation, language, tribe and tongue to be the people of God, the people with whom God will dwell in his eternal kingdom. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. Amen.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Rev 1:5-6)

1. *erchomai* 7 times, *hēxō* 3 times.

2. Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, *Jesus is Lord* (2003).