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 Revelation 14:6-13
 24th Message
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GLORIFYING GOD IN LIFE AND DEATH

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Current events in the Middle East provide a striking backdrop for our annual visit to the Book of Revelation, especially since the section we'll cover over the next four weeks (14:6–16:21) ends with the Battle of Armageddon. The Rapture Index (“The prophetic speedometer of end-time activity”) moved up a couple of points this week.¹ Newt Gingrich has announced that we are already in World War 3. What will happen? How is this going to end? Are we in the run-up to Armageddon? For answers to such questions, many people turn to their Bibles, especially to the Book of Revelation.

The Book of Revelation is indeed about the things which are going to happen. The very first sentence tells us that this is “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place” (1:1). At the end John is assured, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place” (22:6). What are these things which are going to happen?

Revelation is a book of visions. For the past several years we have been in the main sequence of visions (chapters 4–16), which began with John being summoned up to heaven, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this” (4:1). The sequence ends with the declaration “It is done!” (16:17)—what must happen has happened! Today we begin the final run-up to that declaration; we are close to finding out what it is that must happen!

A prominent feature of this central sequence of visions is the three sets of seven: seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. People commonly think that these are the things which must happen, but they are not. Instead John uses Old Testament imagery to paint pictures of divine judgment, which are warnings heralding the things which must happen. Interspersed among the sets of seven with their images of judgment are what I call interludes. These are of great importance for they help us understand the judgments pictured in the sets of sevens.

The most extensive interlude is chapters 12–14, between the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. Here we are given a symbolic panorama of the conflict between good and evil. The dragon, Satan, exercises his destructive influence on earth through the tyrannical rule of the first beast and the deception of the second beast, the false prophet. John's readers at the end of the first century would have recognized these two beasts as the Roman emperor and the system which promoted the worship of the emperor. Rome is long-gone, but Satan is still at work, diverting the world from the worship of the one true God and opposing those who worship this God.

In chapter 14, in a series of three visions, John shows us what God is doing about this evil that is rampant in the world. In the first of these visions (14:1–5), John saw the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion. This is the heavenly Zion, the counterpart of the earthly Zion where in the Old Testament God installed his king over his people Israel. No matter how powerful Satan the dragon might seem, he has been

unable to prevent God installing his king. This is the true King, the King of kings and Lord of lords. The beast, whom the dragon has installed on his throne, is but an imposter. This true King is seen as the Lamb, for God's way of victory over evil is the death and resurrection of his Son. The remaining two visions of chapter 14 announce the consequences of this victory, showing how God extends his reign from heaven to earth. We'll look at the first vision this week (14:6–13), and the second vision next week (14:14–20).

A. The Eternal Gospel (14:6–11)

In the first vision, John sees three angels follow one another through the heavens, each proclaiming a message. They fly in mid-air, directly overhead we would say, because their three-fold message is for all to hear.

1. Worship God (14:6–7)

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.” (Rev 14:6–7 NIV)

The first angel calls all people to worship God the Creator. This proclamation is described as an eternal gospel. This is not the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, but news that is much older than that, news that goes right back to the beginning of the world. Ever since the first verse of the Bible—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1)—there has been a fundamental divide between the Creator and creation. All creation owes worship to its Creator. In chapter 4 John saw the heavenly beings gathered around the throne acclaiming God as worthy because he has created all things (4:11). We worship God “for it is seemly so to do” as our opening hymn put it.² Failure to do so is not a mark of enlightenment but an act of rebellion. Satan and his angelic assistants were thrown out of heaven for their rebellion, their refusal to worship their Creator. Satan has deluded humanity into extending that rebellion, worshiping that which is created rather than he who alone is Creator.

This call to worship God the Creator is addressed to “those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.” “Earth-dwellers” is a term which John uses consistently to refer to those who live without reference to God. There are two sets of people in the book: the earth-dwellers who refuse to worship God, and those destined to be heaven-dwellers who do worship God. Through the false-prophet, Satan has deceived these earth-dwellers into worshiping the beast, the imposter whom he has set on his throne (13:8, 12). This Satanic kingdom of those who refuse to worship God encompasses every nation, tribe, language and people.

What does it mean to worship God? This first angelic herald uses three synonymous terms: fear God, give him glory, and worship him.

Neither Hebrew nor Greek saw any incompatibility in using “fear” to describe what our attitude to God should be. But to fear God in a positive way sounds strange to modern ears, so often this word gets explained as showing reverence. But there is more to it than reverence. To fear God means to recognize that he is the one who has total power over us, that we are in his hands, that he can dispose of us as he wills. This fear of God is to be balanced against the most frequent command in Scripture, “Fear not.” But this command to fear not is predicated upon the fear of the Lord. As another hymn says, “Fear him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear.”³ But if you do not fear God you will have everything else to fear. Once we accept the fact that we are in the hands of our Creator, we can have confidence that he is more than equal to all circumstances.

To glorify God means to give him honor. The root idea of the Hebrew word for glory, which lies behind John’s thinking here, is “weight.” We give God weight by recognizing that he is our superior. The opposite of this is to trivialize him. The most extreme form of trivialization is complete disregard, but there are numerous ways in which we can acknowledge God yet still trivialize him. We do so when we co-opt him as a genie in the bottle to bless our selfish desires, church programs, or nation. We do so when we pay attention to him on Sundays, then put him in the back seat on Monday through Saturday.

To worship God means to pay him homage. In both Hebrew and Greek the word implies falling flat on your face before your lord, be he human or divine. We are gathered for a worship service, during which we have sung songs. Too often we think that this is our worship. But it is not: these songs are the glory and honor and praise that we render unto the triune God. Worship is what comes after that. Having brought him our praise, we fall on our faces in awe. This requires seeing God for who he is, having a large view of God. Nothing is more helpful here than the Book of Revelation, this revelation of the seen and the unseen worlds. Heaven is opened to our gaze, where we see God the Creator enthroned, receiving the praise and worship of the heavenly court. There beside him is the Lamb, our Redeemer, also receiving the praise and worship of the heavenly court. There too, joining in the worship, are the saints who have gone before us. We, on earth, created by God and redeemed by the Lamb, are moved by the Spirit to join our voices to theirs.

To fear God, to give him glory, and to worship him means that our thinking begins and ends with God, who is himself the Beginning and the End. Our thinking revolves around him because we recognize that our lives revolve around him. In this orientation of our lives around God and Christ lies our perfect freedom. As the Catechism says, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”⁴

Those who rebel against God think they are doing so in the name of freedom. It has been this way ever since the Garden when the serpent persuaded the woman to act on her own, to make her own decision. But this act of moral autonomy led to death not life. We were not created to be our own masters. We are created to live our lives in reference to God. Therein lies our perfect freedom and our true enjoyment.

2. Fallen is Babylon (14:8)

A second angel followed and said, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.” (14:8)

The second angel introduces us to a new player in this book, one whom we will read a great deal about in chapter 18. This is Babylon the great city. It is the world city, humanity gathered together living in autonomy from God, in self-sufficiency and self-security. It is a seductive city, intoxicating its inhabitants with its idolatrous wares. In defiance of God, humanity gathered together at Babel to build a city and a tower reaching to heaven (Gen 11:1-11). God reached down from heaven to do two things. He scattered the people so they could no longer build the city; he did so to limit the accumulation and concentration of evil. But he also did something positive: calling Abraham to leave Ur he began to build a people who would be the antithesis of Babylon, a people with whom he would dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city. Redemption history has been the story of these two cities: Babylon the great city versus Jerusalem the holy city; the people who live apart from God versus the people who live in God’s presence as his people.

Throughout history Babylon has repeatedly rebuilt itself as a seemingly invincible city, secure in its autonomy from God, and hostile to the people of God. But each time it has fallen under divine judgment. “Fallen, fallen is Babylon,” announced Isaiah (21:9) as if it had already happened. And it did happen: mighty Babylon, secure behind its enormous walls, fell to Cyrus of Persia. But Babylon rose again, like a phoenix from the ashes. To the original readers of Revelation, Babylon was Rome, the world city reborn. Rome, the eternal city; Rome, the center of a vast empire; Rome, which in the guise of the goddess Roma was worshiped throughout the world. Using the words of Isaiah, this second heavenly messenger pronounces judgment on this new Babylon: “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great.” Again it happened: Rome, the eternal city, fell.

Babylon has fallen, but Babylon is alive and well, not least here in Silicon Valley, where she still holds out her seductive cup of intoxicating, idolatrous wine. Yes, Babylon continues to rise from the ashes, but this cry of the angel is also an announcement of final judgment on all Babylons, on every attempt of humanity to live apart from God.

3. Judgment on False Worshipers (14:9-11)

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” (14:9-11)

The third angel pronounces judgment on all who worship the beast. Everyone in Revelation worships, everyone that is except the two trinities: the divine Trinity: the one seated upon the throne, the Lamb, and the seven-fold Spirit; and the counterfeit trinity: the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. It’s not a question of whether or not you worship; it’s a matter of whom you worship. To whom do you give glory and honor? Whom do you recognize as your source of life, meaning and hope? In the first century the majority attributed life, meaning and hope to Rome and its emperor. The first emperor,

Octavian, was acclaimed as the son of a god; as Augustus, one worthy of worship; as the savior, who had brought peace to the world. Domitian, the emperor at the time Revelation was written, insisted that he was “lord and god.” Throughout the empire, and especially in the province of Asia, temples were built for the worship of Rome and of the emperor. This was not worship that was forced upon the people; this was worship that they willingly gave.

Post-Enlightenment society is too sophisticated, too rational, to believe in the worship of gods, goddesses and divine emperors. But it still attributes life, meaning, hope and salvation to the wrong sources. It still refuses to recognize that it is in God the Creator that “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28); that it is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is the Savior, the Prince of Peace. Upon all such rebels the third angel pronounces divine judgment.

There is a poetic justice here. Babylon has made all the nations drink the wine of her passion—adultery, a metaphor for idolatry. In turn God will make her inhabitants drink the wine of his passion—his wrath.⁵ They will fall under the same judgment as Sodom and Gomorrah: fire and sulfur, from which they will have no rest.

This then is the three-fold proclamation to the whole world: all people should worship God the Creator; the kingdoms of this world will fall; and those who refuse to worship God will be judged. This is an eternal proclamation: all three elements are already present in the early chapters of Genesis. This is gospel: it is good news because it means that God will have his way, that the insurrection on earth will be put down, that the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our God, that evil will be finally removed.

This is an offensive gospel. Rebels do not like to be told to submit to the one against whom they rebel. They do not like to be told that their world will come crashing down. They do not like to be told that there will be a day of reckoning, a day of final judgment. I got a vivid illustration of this earlier this month, when attending the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held this year in Edinburgh. After a paper on Revelation that I enjoyed very much, during the Q&A session, a Scotsman spoke up with heated passion, railing against the images of judgment in the book, specifically the images of judgment on Babylon. He was angry at God, angry at the book, angry at the concept of final judgment. Such is the response of earth-dwellers.

This eternal gospel is predicated on the vision of chapter 4, where we see God, seated on the throne, sovereign over all that he has made, and receiving the worship of the heavenly court. As Creator, he is worthy of all praise and honor. But there is another gospel, one predicated upon the vision of the slain Lamb in chapter 5. The dragon’s kingdom encompasses every nation, language, tribe and tongue; all these have been deceived by the false prophet into worshiping the beast, and seduced by Babylon’s intoxicating wine into idolatrous worship of that which is not fit to be worshiped. But the Lamb is plundering this kingdom, redeeming people from every nation, language, tribe and tongue to be a people for God. There is nothing the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, or Babylon can do about it. The means that the Lamb uses to do this is his own shed blood. The way he has conquered is by being the slain Lamb.

God’s people expected a conquering Lion to save them by judging all the other people. But what God gave them was a slain Lamb, because they themselves were liable to judgment. Had we only the conquering Lion then hell would be full and heaven empty of people. All humanity is complicit in rejection of God and rejection of

his Messiah. It was in Jerusalem, the “holy” city, that this Messiah was put to death—Jerusalem which had become indistinguishable from Babylon. Had we been there, we too would have called for his crucifixion. This Jesus drank to the dregs the cup of God’s wrath, the cup that he alone had no need to drink, other than his obedient submission to his Father’s will. Because of his perfect obedience to the Father, actively in life and passively in death, God vindicated him, raising him from the dead and installing him on the heavenly Zion as King of kings and Lord of lords. Through his blood he is redeeming people to God: people who now acclaim that it is Christ, not Caesar, who is Lord; that it is Christ, not the emperor, who is the Savior, the bringer of peace; that it is Christ, not Caesar, who is august, who is worthy of worship. The astonishing thing is that such people, with full Scriptural support, find there is no conflict between the worship of Christ the slain Lamb and the call to worship God alone. The slain Lamb is as worthy of the praise and worship of heaven and earth as is the one seated upon the throne.

But this sets up a conflict between those who acclaim Christ as Lord and those who acclaim Caesar, or anyone or anything else. The Book of Revelation is a pastoral letter, written by John to seven churches who are caught in this tension. He adds two words of pastoral counsel, about how to live well and how to die well.

B. Pastoral Counsel (14:12-13)

1. Living Well (14:12)

This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus. (14:12)

How are the saints to live while awaiting judgment on those who oppose them? The easy answer would be that they are to flee to the desert, out of reach of the tyrannical arm of the beast and the seductions of Babylon, there to await God. But God doesn’t want his church out in the desert; he wants it in the middle of Babylon though not part of Babylon. He wants it under the nose of antichrist but not paying allegiance to antichrist. The seven churches to whom John wrote were in major cities in the province of Asia, cities that competed with one another in worshiping the emperor, cities that prospered greatly from Rome. It was in just these cities that God had put his churches as lampstands where they were to bear faithful testimony to the Creator God and to the Redeemer Lamb.

The great danger with having churches planted in the midst of Babylon is that they become infected with Babylon’s way of thinking. Jerusalem of the Old Testament became indistinguishable from Babylon in its idolatry and confidence in its own inviolability. So God removed his presence and handed the city over to Babylon. The Jerusalem of the first century became indistinguishable from the new Babylon, Rome, in its rejection of God’s Messiah and its confidence in its own inviolability. So God again removed his presence and handed the city over to the new Babylon. But though the earthly Zion rejected the Messiah, God has installed this Messiah on the heavenly Mount Zion. Through the redeeming blood of this Messiah, rejected by man but vindicated by God, he has established colonies of this heavenly Zion on earth, right under the nose of Satan. From an earthly point of view these colonies seem hopelessly weak. But all they have to do is to endure in their faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ, insisting that it is he who is Lord.

The messages to the seven churches show that these churches vary considerably in their faithful endurance. The churches who are most faithful in life are the ones facing the strongest opposition: Smyrna

and Philadelphia. They are called to be faithful even unto death. Pergamum and Thyatira have compromised with the world, probably out of fear of death. Ephesus and Sardis have grown complacent due to their apparent visible success. The final church, Laodicea, has been thoroughly infected by Babylon: it says, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing" (3:17). That is Babylon's way of thinking through-and-through.

2. Dying Well (14:13)

Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."

"Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." (14:13)

John's second word of pastoral counsel is an exhortation to die well. It is presented as a beatitude, the second of seven in the book. It is one of the most frequently cited verses of the book, regularly used at funerals to give comfort to friends and family of the departed. But note the context here: the conflict between the two kingdoms, between the two cities, between the two sets of worshipers. For the saints at the end of the first century, living well brought the real possibility of death. But if they die in the Lord, enduring to the end in their faithful witness to him, then they die well. We don't face death from persecution, but we are still called to die well. I think of Marie Chaney who died in May. She died well, radiant to the end in her testimony to Jesus.

"Yes," adds the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." In contrast to the rebels who will have no rest in their judgment, the saints will enjoy rest in paradise, the New Jerusalem. In the context of Revelation their deeds are simply their faithful witness to Jesus Christ in life and in death.

May the Lord God, through his Spirit, give us such a vision of himself, the one who sits upon the throne, and of the Lamb, that we endure faithfully in life and in death, that we live well and that we die well. Amen.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

1. Online: <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html>.
2. William Kethe, *All People That on Earth Do Dwell* (1561), a metrical rendition of Psalm 100.
3. Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, *Through All the Changing Scenes of Life* (1696), a metrical rendition of Psalm 34. This particular line renders verse 9, "Fear the LORD, you his saints."
4. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 1.
5. The same Greek word, *thumos* "passion," is translated "maddening" (v 8) and "fury" (v 10).

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