

THE HARVEST OF THE EARTH

In this particular vision recorded for us in the last section of Revelation 14, the apostle John is made to see the ingathering of two harvests. The first harvest is mentioned in the verses 14-16 and is described as the "*harvest of the earth*".

In fact, it says a bit more. It says in verse 15 "*the harvest of the earth is ripe.*"

Literally it says, "*the harvest of the earth is dried.*" Wheat after it is sown comes up green but as it matures and ripens, and the dry season has arrived, then it dries up. That's the time the grains in the wheat stalks are ready for harvesting. We can call this first harvest the grain harvest. Nowadays big machines, called harvesters, are run over the wheat and the grain is gathered. In Jesus' day, the work was done by a reaper and he had a sickle, which is a semi-circular blade with a short handle.

The second harvest is referred to in the verses 17-20 and it is the gathering of the "*clusters of grapes from the earth's vine.*" We can call the second harvest the grape harvest. In the vision that John saw the ripe grapes were also gathered with a sickle.

It further says in verse 14 that the grain harvest, which is the first harvest, is gathered in by "*one like a son of man.*" It is Christ Himself and an angel commands Him to proceed with the harvest. The second harvest, the harvest of grapes, is reaped by an angel who is told by another angel to go ahead.

The question we must ask is this - what is this vision showing? What is its purpose? The answer is that we are looking at the end of the world. We are given here a harvest scene that represents the end of the age, the end of history. But why two harvests? Well, the first harvest represents the gathering of all those whom God has elected to salvation. And the second harvest represents the gathering of all those whom God will judge for their unbelief and rejection of God.

So what we have here is the winding up of the ages. We are presented here the final moments of the history of the world. The thousand years that stretched from Christ's first coming all the way to His second coming are actually completed in this vision given to John. It is the hour of full redemption for all the saved and the hour of the final judgment for all the lost. The Holy God has come to take all His children home and to deal once and for all with His enemies.

The book Revelation has spoken about the coming of both salvation and judgment a number of times. Several times we have been shown the great joy of the forever saved and the terrible anguish of those forever lost. We have had peaks into heaven and have been given glimpses into hell. Full liberation and final judgment are the two great themes running right throughout the Bible. And this passage from chapter 14 is showing us the final separation between believers and unbelievers.

These two streams of people have winded their way through history. The one stream represents the followers of Christ and the other stream the followers of Satan. One is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and the other the enemies of Christ. One lot are those who worship God, who live by faith and grace, who hope and trust in God. The other lot are those who worship the beast, who ridicule the one and only true God, reject Him as the Creator of heaven and earth, and persecute His Son Jesus Christ the Saviour.

These two beliefs have existed side by side through all of time since the Fall into sin. The one having true faith, the other having a false faith. The one embracing biblical doctrine, the other embracing secularism and humanism. The one possessing righteousness and true knowledge of God, the other holding on to unrighteousness and a false knowledge. In short, the saved and the not saved. And with the verses of our text we are seeing the numbers of both groups having reached a fullness and each goes to its final destination in eternity.

In the New Testament there are a number of references to God gathering those whom He has saved and destroying those who rebelled against Him. John the Baptist, for example, spoke of Christ as having a "*winnnowing fork in His hand, and He will clear the threshing floor, gathering the wheat [or grain] into His barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*" [Matt. 3:12].

The scene here is of a farmer who has harvested his wheat and put the bundles on his threshing floor. There he picks up the wheat with his winnowing fork and throws it into the air, allowing the grain from the wheat to become

separated from the chaff. Then he gathers the grain into his barn and burns the chaff. The grain is what matters, the chaff is of no importance.

Christ is like the farmer who has harvested his wheat. The threshing floor represents the final judgment. The grain that is separated from the chaff represents the saved people of God and the chaff represents the unbelievers who are left behind. The saved are gathered to the new heaven and earth and the unbelievers are doomed to hell with its unquenchable fire.

And then there is Jesus' parable about the wheat and the weeds, which is really another version of what we have in our text here in Revelation 14. In the parable the Lord compares the kingdom of heaven to a man sowing good seed in his field. But the enemy came along and sowed weeds among the wheat. The man's servants notice the weeds and the wheat growing alongside each other and they suggest to the owner that they pull out the weeds. But the owner does not like this idea because he fears that the wheat plants might also be pulled up with the weeds. He decides to wait until harvest time and then the harvesters can collect the weeds first and burn them and then gather the wheat into the barn [Matt. 13:24-30].

When the Lord Jesus explained this parable to His disciples He said that He, the Son of Man, sows the good seed. The field is the world and the good seed represents the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one and they exist right amongst the sons of the kingdom. In other words, Christians and non-Christians live side by side in the world. The harvest is at the end of the age and the angels are the harvesters. It's when the sons of the evil one, the followers of the beast, will be destroyed, whilst the sons of the kingdom, the followers of the Lamb, will inherit the new heaven and earth [Matt. 13:36-43].

Notice also in Revelation 14 that John saw sitting on a white cloud one "*like the son of man.*" Some say he is just another angel, which could be possible, but when you read Daniel 7:13,14 then it is most likely that Christ is this son of man. In Daniel 7: 13,14 we read, "*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. 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.*"

The Lord Jesus fulfilled this prophecy from Daniel when He said of Himself, "*In the future you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven*" [Matt.26:64].

Jesus is the Reaper sent by God into the human grain field of this world. Our Lord will go through humanity with His sickle and gather all people for the final judgment. But the Lord Jesus is not the grim reaper, He is the glorious and victorious Reaper. And Jesus is no longer the suffering servant who was despised and treated as a common criminal, who went to the cross to die a shameful death. He is now the mighty King, the Saviour of God's elect, the One coming on the clouds of heaven to carry out one more great redemptive act in God's plan of salvation. It is the wonderful restoration of the whole creation to its former glory. It is to separate the sheep from the goats. It is full redemption on the new heaven and earth. And the final harvest at the end of the age is the way to it.

With His first coming Jesus began to sow the seeds of the kingdom of heaven. And sowing time implies that a harvest is coming. Even now, today, it is still sowing time. The weeds and the wheat are still growing together. But one day it will please God to harvest the grain and burn the weeds. And right here in Revelation 14 we have a picture of that happening. In this vision John sees the mighty Christ coming to gather in the harvest.

Remember chapter 1 describing that awesome and unforgettable vision of the exalted Christ? Then already it was said of Christ, "*Look, He is coming with the clouds and every eye will see Him.*" [i:7]. Back then already Christ was referred to as "*one like the Son of man.*" He was seen standing among the lampstands which are the seven churches. And now here in chapter 14 we see Him coming to harvest the earth. He is seated on a cloud, like "*a son of man*", but "*with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand.*"

Christ does not proceed with the harvesting until an angel tells Him in a loud voice to go ahead. The angel is from the temple in heaven, he comes from the presence of Father who is seated on the throne. It means that only the Father knows when it's time to fully establish the kingdom on the new earth. Even the Son does not know when this time has come. He Himself said, "*No one knows about that date or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*" [Mark 13:32]. But here in this vision the time has come and an angel

from the Father comes to command Christ to begin the harvest. That command will be given when the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.

And with a majestic use of words that only the Bible possesses, the most dramatic and glorious moment for all of God's people is announced: "*So He who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested*" [vs.16]. No further details are given here but just that the most talked about moment for the church has arrived - to be with Christ in glory forever. The Saviour, who became like a son of man, has come to deliver His people from a world where He Himself had no place to lay His head, and where His followers often experienced the same thing. Christ is taking home all those who are His. Their heavenly dwelling has been fully prepared. God has completed the work of bringing all His elect to faith and conversion. The number of the redeemed is now full, the church has received all her sons and daughters.

And thus there is no reason for God to continue with the world. All the elect have been brought to salvation. And the judgment on all who denied the Creator His rightful place of honour and rejected His Son the Saviour, is now executed.

Yes, for many years now many in the world have decided to deny the existence of God. They prefer to believe in evolution and reject the Creator. But the time for their judgment has now also come. John now sees in this same vision another harvest, its ripe grapes being gathered into the winepress of God's wrath. And the result is a terrible bloodbath. This harvest follows immediately upon the first one. There is no time delay between the two harvests. When the saved are fully saved then straightaway the damned are fully damned. 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17 says, "*The Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*"

And then immediately after this the unbelieving people of the world will be finally judged. However, there are Christians who deny that the second harvest follows immediately after the first harvest. They say that after Christ has taken all the saved from the earth, then there will follow a period of seven years during which the earth will continue but with much tribulation for those still living on it. During this time, it is said, many Jews will be converted and spread the gospel of Christ. After the seven years, it is explained, Christ will come for the third time to establish a literal one thousand years and reign with His people on earth. Towards the end of those exact thousand years of great bliss Satan will be let loose and the battle of Armageddon takes place but the Lord will then usher in the final end. This interpretation is called the pre-millennial position and is often presented with great drama and with many variations.

But many Christians do not believe that this is what the Bible is saying. They believe from the evidence of all the relevant texts and passages that the end of the world, the general resurrection, the final judgment and the second coming of Christ will all happen in one great decisive moment. It's what we also have here in chapter 14 - immediately after the Lord has taken His people to Himself, He proceeds to bring the wicked to their end at once.

And so another angel, also with a sharp sickle, comes from the presence of God and he is commanded by still another angel, to gather the weeds. John sees this last angel coming from the altar and it reminds us of the prayers of the saints who were asking God how long before He will judge those who did them harm.

These saints in heaven are God's persecuted people and they were killed for their testimony for Christ [6:9,10]. They were unwilling to compromise on truth. It are their prayers for justice which cause God to send angels with their censers filled with fire and these were hurled upon the earth and it brought about peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake [8:3-5]. With all this the Lord has come to avenge His persecuted people and He slays the wicked with the fire of His judgment. And this is what is actually happening here in these verses 17-20. The angel who informs the other angel to proceed with the gathering of the grapes is the angel who is in charge of the fire. Judgment is released.

Verse 20 tells us that the wicked "*were trampled in the winepress outside the city.*" You have probably seen those big vats filled with grapes and people with their bare feet tramping on them in order to get the juice out of the grapes. Such a picture is used here to depict God trampling on unbelievers who die as a result and their blood flows out of the press. It takes place "*outside the city*", which means outside the heavenly city. Only the saved are in the heavenly city. All others are outside. They are cast out forever.

You will have noticed the mention of a lot of blood flowing out of the winepress of God's wrath. The blood rises "as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1600 stadia." The mention of horses here probably refers to a violent war at the end. God's final destruction of the wicked may make use man's own destructive powers.

Ancient battles involved many horses but there is uncertainty about what to make of the blood of the slain unbelievers rising to the level of a horse's head where the bridle is and then flowing for a distance of 1600 stadia [or furlongs]. That is approximately 300 kilometres and that means an awful lot of blood. Some have pointed out that this also happens to be the length of Palestine in the New Testament times. They then go on to say all this blood is the result of an invading Russian army causing terrible conflict in modern-day Israel. But such an interpretation would not have made any sense to the Christian church in the first century who were the first to read Revelation. The name Russia would have been totally foreign to them. There was then not even a Russia.

It would seem best to take this vast quantity of blood as pointing to the blotting out of the rest of mankind in the final judgment. And the 1600 stadia is most likely symbolic and it then stands for the complete judgment of all the wicked in the whole earth.

But with this picture of God's wrath on the unbelieving being likened to the trampling of grapes in a winepress, Revelation 14 ends on a rather sombre note. We are left with the reality of the weeds being burned. But then the book Revelation does that a number of times. It shows the glorious end of the saved and terrible end of the lost. And each time it does that we need humbly accept in faith the actions of God on both believers and unbelievers.

There is much comfort in believing and trusting that because you are in Christ you are part of the grain harvest. But that comfort is only there because you hear from the same passage what God will do to the weeds. It's a great relief not to be lost forever, which is what we deserved.

Yet, it disturbs us knowing that God will burn those who ignored Him, rejected Him and not believed in Him. Does that not put a damper on the joy of being saved? But we cannot say a single thing to God about His judgment being too severe or unjust. Through His Word God teaches us His purity, His absolute holiness, and His just justice. He did not make men weak, or sinful, or wicked. When people sin it's because they want to.

We do know that God has sacrificed His own Son in order to open the way for sinners to live. Isn't that the ultimate act of love that God can do? Yes, we love God's love for sinners. "*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" But when we believingly accept God's love and rejoice in it, we also have to accept His judgment on those who remained unmoved by His love. And therefore we have to accept both the grain and the weeds and what God does to either one. To only speak about the harvest of the saved would make us untrue to God's Word and thus untrue to God Himself. All of us should remember again and again that familiar statement from this book, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*" It is all too easy to hear one the thing and not the other. Are you, am I, saying too much about God's love and not enough about His judgment? Or too much about His judgment and not enough about His love? It is a good thing that in the Christian church we have just the one Bible from which we all must gain our wisdom and that Bible speaks of both a saving of the saved and a judging of the unbelieving. That's what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Amen.

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