
The Redeemed and the Ruined

Revelation 14:1-20

Russ Kennedy

Harvesting...

A picture to us, not often our experience...

An ingathering of all that is ripe and ready...

This text brings before us two groups of people. I have called them, the redeemed and the ruined. As we think through what John saw we ought to examine ourselves to know which we are.

The structure here appears to be a different sort of parallelism:

A The Redeemed (v. 1-5)

B The Judgment Declarations (v. 6-11)

C The Call to Endure (v. 12-13)

A The Gathering of Believers (v. 14-16)

B The Harvesting of the Wicked (v. 17-20)

In many ways this is a sobering text. It is often hard to hear when we have loved ones who have never believed and repented. But on that final day, the wrath of God will be poured out, His Name will be vindicated and justice served. May we have ears to hear and hearts to believe.

The Firstfruits of the Redeemed**(v. 1-5)**

¹ Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ² And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³ and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴ 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, ⁵ and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

The Scene**(v. 1)**

The imagery here is both Psalm 2 and Revelation 4-5. The Lamb is the Lion, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is established on Mt. Zion, the place of God's rule and reign in the universe. Mt. Zion is where God's rules and the remnant who are redeemed worship.

We met and identified these 144,000 in Revelation chapter 7 They are initially the redeemed from among the Jews who are brought into the New Covenant. Here they are seen as representing all of the redeemed from all of the ages. They are the first fruits. They are an initial ingathering that points to how great the harvest will be. ¹³

The Song**(v. 2)**

John's next vision develops a clear and intended contrast between the followers of the false lamb and the true Lamb. ¹⁴

Chapter 13

lamb (v. 11)

out of the earth (v. 11)

worship of the beast (v. 12)

beast's number 666 (v. 18)

everyone is enslaved (v. 16)

mark of the beast (v. 16, 17)

deception of the beast (v. 14)

Chapter 14

Lamb (v. 1, 4)

Mount Zion (v. 1)

song of the 144,000 (v. 3)

saints' number 144,000 (v. 1)

saints are redeemed (v. 3)

name of Father and Lamb (v. 1)

no lie in their mouth (v. 5)

Kistemaker goes on to write:

After revealing the beast's attempt to force the surrender of the saints, John assures them of their security and victory. He paints a picture of the joy and happiness the saints express in following the Lamb and being in his presence. They are the 144,000 redeemed from the earth who were privileged to learn a new song of glory and joy that was heard from heaven. Not the beast out of the earth, the parody of the Lamb, not Satan the imitator, but the Lamb is King of kings and Lord of lords. He stands majestically on Mount Zion as the Victor over all the anti-Christian forces in the world. Thus the saints must take heart and not despair, for they share in the victory of the Lamb.

We do not know what the words to this song are. Once again, praise is the saints response to the presence, power and preeminence of Christ. The song is first loud and then

The Saints

(v. 4-5)

The 144,000 are described as being faithful and righteous.

Not defiled with women, virgins. In the context of Revelation, this is referring to that fact that they have not succumbed to the wiles of harlot, the woman. They have maintained their purity in view of the massive spiritual adultery around them. They have remained faithful as a bride (Revelation 19:7; 21:2; 2 Corinthians 11:2).

They follow the Lamb everywhere. This means they are faithful in serving the Lord. They do not succumb to idolatry. They are willing to go anywhere, endure any trial, even through great suffering.

They are redeemed. The saints are a blood-bought people. They have purchased from the slave market of sin and are now the possession of God.

They are truthful. They will not speak lies. They will refuse to tell untruths for the sake of preserving their lives or defending themselves.

The last phrase is the foundation, the grounds, the reason the rest is true. “**FOR** they are blameless,” points to their standing before God. This is not about performance or reputation; this is about the character that yields obedience. All the rest is an expression of that heaven-declared fact that they are righteous, blameless.

The Three Announcements

(v. 6-11)

Three messengers with three announcements are seen next. All three declarations concern the last days, the period from the resurrection to the return. But they focus on the times just before the Day of the Lord. These announcements are parallel to the three woes but are three words.

Of the Gospel Proclamation

(v. 6-7)

⁶ Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. 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.”

Here the gospel, the good news of redemption, is proclaimed in the entire world. This heavenly messenger highlights the fulfillment of Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:9-14.

⁹ “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

This proclamation is made in view of the judgment that is about to fall. It is a call to fear God and to give Him glory. While there is still time to repent, repent. But there will come a day when all will stand before the High King and will fear Him and give Him the glory He is due. Understand this: all of those who go to hell *do not go still shaking their fist in God's face*. They will have to acknowledge Him as Lord. Then, they will go to the judgment that is their lot.

Of the Judgment Pronouncement (v. 8)

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."

The next angel announces the fall of Babylon. This is the first that is said of Babylon in Revelation so who this is and what is fallen is unpacked by the rest of the book. The Babylon theme through the Bible speaks of false religion and false kingdoms united both to seduce and to subjugate humanity. This is the great false kingdom in rebellion against God's kingdom. It is Babylon the great who is responsible for the exile of the church. Intoxicated with the wine of rebellion and lusting for power, she will be crushed and consumed by the wrath of God.

Of the Damnation Pending (v. 9-11)

⁹ And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 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. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."

The final word is one of warning. Those who follow the beast and are loyal to him will come under the undiluted, full strength wine of the wrath of God. He will pour it straight into the cup and they will drink it deep. It will not be a temporary incarceration but a permanent torment. It will be eternal damnation. This is because to follow the beast is to continue to rebel against God. It is to choose to worship and obey the anti-god. While it is being done all through the long sad history of man, to do so in the face of the clear judgments of God in the last week of years is surely damnable.

The Gathering of the Believers

(v. 14-16)

¹⁴ Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵ And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." ¹⁶ So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.

There is a great deal of discussion and debate about these two paragraphs. Are they referring to the same event? Are they both the judgment of the wicked? Is one a gathering of the saints and the other the harvesting of the sinners? Good arguments exist for both views. If both are referring to judgment then what I say on verses 17-21 would apply here. However, I am inclined to think that the verses 14-16 are the harvest gathering of the elect. Two primary texts point me in that direction.

First, everyone agrees that this text is connecting us to Daniel 7:13-14:

¹³ "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Listen to the similarity in Matthew 13:30, 36-43:

³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' "

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷ He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

And most recognize the thread that runs through Matthew 24:29-31:

²⁹ "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

So, then, it seems to me that these verses are referring to the coming of the Son of Man and the sending of the angels first to gather in the elect who remain alive. This is what is called the “catching away” or the “rapture”. Paul says that we will be caught to meet Jesus in the air. This is the harvest of the wheat. He gathers His people home.

The Reaping of the Wicked

(v. 17-20)

In a powerfully graphic image, the wicked are reaped.

¹⁷ Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸ And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, “Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” ¹⁹ So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. ²⁰ And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse’s bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

Another angel appears coming out of the temple in heaven. He is carrying sickle. When instructed he puts in his sickle into the earth and gathers the wicked. They are then thrown into the wine press of God’s great wrath.

We are not generally familiar with this scene. But the grape sickle is a long curved blade, razor sharp, with a short handle. The harvester moves among the vineyard and slices off cluster and cluster gathering them in a wagon. Then the clusters are taken to massive vats and thrown in. Then the harvester steps up into the wine press and begins to stomp around, smashing the grapes and the juice pours out. Soon he is covered from head to toe in the blood red stain of the grapes. Shocking as it may be this is the image. God, in His righteous and mighty wrath, is tromping about in His winepress, stomping the unrepentant rebels into pulp.

In addition to the texts we have already seen, Joel 4:13 forms the backdrop for this reaping of the earth.

¹¹ Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O LORD. ¹² Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations.

¹³ Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great. ¹⁴ Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. ¹⁵ The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

Lest we miss the horror of this scene, John says that the blood ran 4-5 feet deep for distance of around 180 miles. This is a slaughter of epic proportions. The point here is that God’s unrestrained wrath when poured out is fearsome. This is the wrath poured out on rebellious humanity at the end of the age who rejected God and followed the beast. Unbelievers are meant to tremble. And believers are meant to be grateful to God for both our deliverance from such judgment. We are also meant to give thanks for the vindication of His Name and the exercise of justice.

The Call for Endurance

(v. 12-13)

In the light of all this, the saints are called to endure.

¹² Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

¹³ And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

Quite simply, believers must set themselves to endure to the end. No, you must be prepared to endure to the end. How do you hear such a call? What does this mean to people who will walk away from faith and obedience and suffering over the simplest of obstacles and setbacks? Yes, it is God who causes us to endure. But we must endure.

Ah here is the reason we can endure even unto death. Those who die in the Lord are blessed. We are blessed from God. We are blessed in our rest. Our labor and travail here is over. And what we do matters. Believe me brothers and sisters – your perseverance in the hard work and toil of serving Christ matters. Your deeds for the Lord will follow you to heaven.

Reflect and Respond

Two groups of people: the redeemed and the ruined. In which are you?

What glories we have to look forward to: heaven, God, songs, praise and worship.

My friend, we are not in the days here predicted yet. But when you come to that day, remember these words. Do not give your support and loyalty to the beast. Do not rebel against the King of Kings. Bow to Him. Repent while you may.

And may I call on you to endure? Don't give up. Don't give in. By the grace of God, for the glory of God, believe and obey until you rest from all your labors.

¹³ Contra many dispensationalists, these are not 144,000 Jews who are saved during the tribulation period and are witnesses of the gospel to the world and enter the Millennial Kingdom. There are so many problems with that interpretation. See our comments on Revelation 7 as well as Greg Beale, Simon Kistemaker, et al.

¹⁴ Kistemaker, p. 400.