

Sermon
“Reasons for Faithfulness”
Discipleship for Today, Part 18
June 27, 2010

Introduction Before the Sermon

The book of Revelation, as we’ve seen, is not so much a crystal ball that helps the especially spiritual to see into the future, but rather a discipleship manual given to help us live more faithfully as followers of Jesus. It does so through the use of vivid imagery that helps awaken our creative side to “see” truth in new ways.

The most recent truth we’ve “seen” is that Christmas is not just about the birth of Christ, but about a cosmic war which has resulted in the defeat of Revelation’s dragon – the devil himself. And that this dragon, while defeated, has not yet been vanquished – that God has delayed His final judgment as an act of grace in order to allow time for God’s people to bear faithful witness to Jesus and through it for humanity to turn back to Him. In the meantime – the time between Jesus’ first coming and his final coming – God’s people are subject to great tribulation – last week through two beasts – dragon influenced political power and dragon influenced religious power.

Today’s text is meant to encourage us to remain faithful as we live in this in-between time. I’ll incorporate the Scripture into

message, but I encourage you to turn to Revelation 14 so you can better fall along. Let's begin with prayer.

Open in Prayer

Introduction

I found this great commentary of Revelation in that most profound of theological works – the comic strip *Peanuts*. Charlie Brown is sitting in front of his television, when his little sister, Sally, approaches him and says, “I memorized the Bible verse we were supposed to memorize for Sunday.” Charlie Brown responds, “What verse?” And Sally says [*show image here*] “I can't remember ... but I think it was from the book of Reevaluation.”

“Reevaluation.” While Sally might have misspoken ... it is really quite a good name for Revelation, isn't it? For what we've seen is that Revelation is meant to help us, especially in the midst of the harsh realities we face in this world, to reevaluate – to rethink things – to see things from a fresh perspective. In particular, after what we saw last week, we might begin to assume again that evil is winning ... that the dragon has the upper hand. But our text today reminds us that things are not as they seem – that there is more to

reality than meets the eye¹ - and does so by offering counter images to the difficult ones of last week in order to encourage us to faithful as Jesus' disciples.

And the first way *we are encouraged* is *by being reminded that heaven is our ultimate destiny*. Instead of followers of the dragon, as we saw last week, we are shown (vs. 1) “... *the Lamb, standing Mount Zion, and with Him 144,000.*” We are familiar with this imagery already – we saw it back in chapter 7, where this 144,000 represented an uncountable number from throughout history of every nation, tribe, people and language who have been redeemed by grace through faith in Jesus Christ – a picture of the church! It is a picture of us! And our future is with Jesus!

And instead of having the mark of the beast, God's people are shown to have the “[*Lamb's*] *name and his Father's name on their foreheads*” – which, we've seen, means we are bearing His character in our being – we will be transformed to be like Jesus!

We will also (vs. 3)... sing “*a new song no one else could learn except the 144,000 who have been redeemed from the earth.*” Not a song for angels – but a song only for the church – one that is

¹ Again, this is Darrell Johnson's language.

uniquely ours. Why? Because we have “*been redeemed*” by Him! The song is ours because only we who have known the depths of sin can sing of the joy of our undeserved salvation.

God’s people are also described those (vs. 4) “*who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure.*” This is not a negative statement against sexuality or women. For throughout the Old Testament faithfulness to God is described using sexual imagery ... with unfaithfulness to God seen as a kind of spiritual adultery. Not so in heaven. Because of God’s grace, we will know perfect intimacy with Jesus.

All because God’s people are seen as (vs. 4) “*purchased from among men and offered as first fruits to God and to the Lamb.*” First fruits were the part of the harvest that were presented as an offering to God because they belonged to God. What we are shown is that Jesus the Lamb purchased us – which means we belong to Him!

That’s our future! A heaven where we are with Jesus, transformed by Him, know perfect relationship with Him, because we have been redeemed by Him and belong to Him! Which is why

Revelation can claim, in verse 13: “*Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.*”

Death a blessing? Yes! Not because this life is bad, but because of the promise of something greater. Imagine, if you would, that you are a pre-born baby. You might think before you born, “I want to stay here. It’s safe and warm.” But after being born, and you experience the wonder of light and sound and parent’s love – there’d be no way you’d want to go back. This wonder is nothing compared to the moments that follow our deaths. Max Lucado pictures it like this:

Angels watch ... burials the same way grandparents monitor deliver room doors.... They can’t wait to see the new arrival. While we’re driving hearses and wearing black, they’re hanging pink and blue streamers and passing out cigars. We don’t grieve when babies enter this world. The hosts of heaven don’t grieve when [God’s people] leave it.”

Now a second way *we are encouraged* is *by being reminded that God is working with us*. For what John sees is (vs. 6-7)

“*another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to all those who live on 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*”

Our call to be faithful witnesses in the midst of the harsh realities of the world is not something we do alone. What we see pictured

here is the truth that God also has a direct hand in it – that He goes before us! And we see this in Scripture. Angels proclaimed the birth of Christ to the shepherds the night of Jesus’ birth. In Acts, it is an angel who tells Cornelius to send for Peter – leading not only to Cornelius ‘and his household’s conversions, but also to outreach to all the Gentiles!

The church in John’s age needed to be reminded that God goes before us. Facing horrific persecution and martyrdom – it looked like the church might be on the brink. Did living for Jesus really matter? What John was shown – and we are shown – is that yes, it does matter – that God uses our witness powerfully.

He did through the witness of those early martyrs. For fast forward from John’s imprisonment just a few decades and hear the Christian leader Tertullian say to the Roman Empire, “we have filled every place among you – your cities, islands, fortresses, towns, marketplaces, your military camps, tribes, companies, palaces, senate, forum ... we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods.” Jesus said, “*I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” And He did it throughout the Roman Empire!

Or when Communists expelled all the missionaries from China and set about closing churches, some thought it was the end of the church in China. Decades later, when China began to open up, what did we discover? That God had taken the faithful witness of Christians in China and grown the church by millions! God is working with us – supernaturally empowering our witness.

The next word of encouragement comes from verse 8, where we read, “*A second angel followed and said, ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.’*” Now this isn’t a reference to the historical Babylon, for it had already fallen, centuries earlier. Instead, by the first century, “Babylon” had become a kind of code word for any nation or city or group in rebellion against God. Revelation’s readers would have identified “Babylon” as Rome. But for those in different ages, Babylon will be embodied in a different group.

Not that Rome had already fallen. Its fall was still some years ahead, but so certain was its fall that it could be referred to as in the past tense. What we are reminded of here is this ... *that every Babylon will fall*. Why this certainty? Because any nation that excludes the living God cannot survive – it is only a matter of time

before God allows it collapse in on itself. As Darrell Johnson observes, “The only way for people in a communist system to hear the truth was to the lie collapse.” My prayer is that the materialistic west won’t have to have its system collapse to hear the truth.

It might have looked like Rome was winning ... but its doom was sure. And in our age, there are lots of places we could point to where it looks like evil is winning ... the persecution of Christians in places like North Korea, or Iran, or Laos, or a myriad of other Babylons. But things will not go on like this forever ... God is at work ... and His justice will be done.

Next, we reminded of is this ... that the gospel brings to each one of us what might be called a crisis of choice – it confronts us with this choice – ***we must decide to follow*** ... or not to follow ... ***Jesus***. For what we see is that next a third angel who says in a loud voice announces the judgment that is coming (vs. 9):

“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”

This is a very difficult image – for many a disturbing image. And in truth, it is meant to be ... meant to shake us – and cause us to “reevaluate” – to think again about our lives.

That said, it is also important to say that just like the rest of Revelation, it is also an image – and that like other images it is meant to be taken as a symbol of truth, and not an exact representation of the truth itself. And so the torment here can be seen as a symbol the awful existence of those who refuse God’s grace and choose instead to be the god of their own lives – and in so doing really miss what life is all about – extended on into eternity. J.I Packer is helpful here:

God’s wrath in the Bible is always something which men choose for themselves. Before hell is an experience inflicted by God, it is a state for which man himself opts.... We need, therefore, to remember that the key to interpreting the many biblical passages, often highly figurative, which picture the divine King and Judge as active against men in wrath and vengeance, is to realize that what God is hereby doing is no more than to ratify and confirm judgments which those whom he ‘visits’ have already passed on themselves by the course they have chosen to follow.”

What we see here is that God takes us seriously. So seriously that our choices matter. And so He gives us this picture to help us see the real question we all must face is not, “Are we going to be a

disciple?” but rather, “Whose disciple are we going to be?”
Disciples of the dragon? Or of Jesus’?

Christ calls to us, saying, “Come to me.” Will we come? He summons us, saying, “Follow me.” Will we follow? He says “Trust in me.” Will we put our faith and trust in Him? Because of sacrifice on our behalf, we can come. In fact, because of what Jesus has done, there is nothing that need keep us from God. Except for one thing. Our choosing not to come.

One more truth that Revelation pictures – that can bring encouragement to us – *that salvation and judgment are both *real* things that Jesus came to bring.*

And we see this in the two pictures of harvesting we are shown. In them we see God coming to reap a harvest of the gospel that has been proclaimed by the angels and the church. In the first, we see Jesus ... “*one like a son of man*” (one of Jesus’ favorite ways of talking about Himself) ... who has a sharp sickle – the tool used to harvest wheat – who (vs. 16) swings “*his sickle over the earth and the earth*” is “*harvested.*” In the second, we see another angel, who also has a sickle, who swings it “*over the earth*”, gathers “*the clusters of grapes from the earth’s vine*” and then throws them into

the great winepress of God's wrath. And then, in one of the most disturbing images of Scripture, we see that these grapes 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 1600 stadia.”*

The wheat harvest is clearly referring to God bringing in His people into the kingdom – it is an image used throughout Scripture this way – for instance, Jesus says in John (John 4:35): *“I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life.”*

Note that Jesus says, *“Even now!”* Jesus reaping from the harvest field is going on even now – bringing people into His kingdom – saving them from the clutches of the dragon and the beasts and making them part of His family.

Now there are two different ways scholars look at the harvest of the grapes. The first is to see it as the flip side of the salvation of God's people – that is, the judgment of the unrepentant. In this sense it reflects the judgment that we saw in verses 9-11. This is a valid way of interpreting this section – and reflects biblical truth

But there is another way of interpreting the grape harvest that is held by some very thoughtful Bible scholars that also reflects biblical truth. It also sees the “grapes of wrath” as judgment, yes, ... but of a different kind. .” It starts by observing the parallel nature of the two harvests. It then recognizes that in no other place in the Scripture is harvest imagery used to portray judgment, but always God’s saving action. And that in Scripture the image of grapes and vines is used to refer to God and God’s people – Jesus says (John 15): “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener*

It then notices *where* the winepress is described as being ... as “*outside the city.*” This was a loaded phrase for people steeped in the gospels. “*Outside the city*” was a phrase used to reference the place where Jesus was crucified – on Calvary’s hill, just outside the city. Jesus told a parable in which vineyard workers kill the son of vineyard’s owner, “*outside*” the vineyard. And the writer of Hebrews (vs. 13:12) says that “*Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.*”

And so can you guess what the winepress is in this view? The cross! For the cross is where God’s wrath against sin was expressed – wrath expressed on Himself in the person of Jesus. It

is judgment, yes – awful judgment – but judgment born by Jesus ... outside the city.

And the blood that flows from the winepress is the blood of Jesus that covers our sin. And it is mixed with the blood of his people – people like John and martyrs, and his people throughout the ages – people whose faithful witness points people to Jesus and helps them be included in Jesus' harvest.

And note the amount of blood – 1600 stadia – 180 miles long – again, not a statistic, but a symbol. Of what? Of a vast amount of blood – more blood than one can imagine – enough to cover the whole land. Enough to cover the sin of humanity. Enough to cover our sin ... my sin ... your sin.

Reevaluate! Look more closely! See things from a new perspective! That's what this chapter is showing us. Yes, the dragon and the two beasts are coming against God's people because God is delaying His final judgment. But in the meantime, between Jesus' first and his final coming, God has not abandoned His people, but is calling God's people to be faithful and be involved in His work. Because we have a wonderful future, a God

who is with us, the assurance of ultimate victory, if we follow Jesus – because of what He has done. Let's pray.