

Revelation 14

Getting Started:

If Rev 12-14 comprises the book's center and the core of John's writing to the churches concerning the whole matter of why evil reigns as it does, Ch.14 is the high-water mark regarding the encouragement the churches will need to obediently confront the evil they face. It's how they win the war with the dragon. It's about their overcoming the evil they face. Here's quick summary of what we've encountered so far in Ch.12 & 13.

Ch.12 – the war's cosmic origin provides the foundation of the spiritual fight in which the churches are engaged. It establishes several key biblical truths the 7 churches need to keep in mind as they endure the spiritual fight before them. 1. Satan's fight against God and his people has been going on for a long time. 2. Satan, although defeated, is persistent and determined. 3. God is more than able to protect his people and the good news they proclaim. 3. This spiritual war will bring God's people trouble and they must endure it.

Ch.13 – the war's earthly impact is key because it progresses the nature of the spiritual battle by showing how the dragon wages war against God's faithful people through the rise of two beasts, one from the sea (13:1), and one from the earth (13:11). The spiritual fight comes right to the doorstep of these Christians' homes. And the dragon's strategy? To draw God's people away from God by offering a counterfeit messiah in the beast. The world has been amazed by the beast and in turn worships it. And the dragon hopes to take advantage of this opportunity to also lure believers away from God.

In Ch. 13 John calls God's people to two responses to the beast's overtures. One is perseverance. Believers experience very hard times as the beast slays many of them. And for a short time it seems like the beast has conquered them. But believers are to persevere (remain faithful) through this severe time through faith in Jesus – the real messiah. Second is to apply wisdom to their circumstances. John's comment 13:18 is telling, "Here is wisdom." The churches must use God's wisdom to discern the beasts before them. They need to understand the reality behind the deception being presented. They must live as wise people (to borrow Paul's phrase) in a crooked and perverse generation.

The problem: the bleakness of Ch 12 & 13

The churches occupy a world overrun with evil. On a larger scale this has always been the lot of God's faithful people whether OT or NT. From the very start of God's formation of his people through Abraham, they've faced great difficulties and persecution. Living in a world dominated by evil and opposition to God, can erode a believer's faith to the point of despair and wanting to cave in. And if John's discussion, ended with Ch.13, the churches might want to lay down and die, or give in to Rome's pressure to worship the Caesars and the pantheon of gods that weighed on them. Against this bleak backdrop, John, however, lifts the churches

eyes to see something else. Evil is not supreme. God is! Ch.14 paints a radical alternative to rampant evil so that the churches can clearly contrast evil with God’s sovereign supremacy.

The perspective God desires for us

Eugene Peterson helpfully observes,

“Dragon, sea beast, and land beast are a satanic trinity that infiltrates the political (*and I would add cultural and social*) world in order to deflect our worship from the God whom we cannot see to the authorities that we can see, and to deceive us into buying into a religion or belief-system that has visible results in self-gratification. St John presents this infiltration as fearsome but not indomitable; the dragon was bested by Michael, the sea beast can be resisted, the land beast can be figured out. Thus the larger-than-life political world is reduced to manageable terms. The Christian, with St John’s help, is not overwhelmed by big government, by sensational religion, by gigantic threats, by colossal odds, by breathless claims The lies of the enemy, clever as they are, are not so clever that they cannot be found out.”

Ch.12-13 the horizontal challenge for the churches

Peterson’s observation is critical because it captures the deception that possibly moved 5 of 7 of the churches to compromise or cave in. Being overwhelmed by the nature of what is seen horizontally can easily diminish what is not seen vertically, convincing the believer that what’s before them is insurmountable. The advantage here is that John sees the churches visible horizontal world (Ch. 12 & 13) powerfully bisected by God’s unseen, but very present vertical world (Ch. 14). Things are put into perspective. And Satan’s deception is uncovered. If he can cause believers to see only the horizontal, fears grow and fester and they will react counter to their true position in Christ (Ch.1). In five of the seven churches this looked like, leaving their first love (Ephesus); entertaining false teaching, becoming stumbling blocks, and immorality (Pergamum, and Thyatira); spiritual deadness (Sardis); and materialism (Laodicea).

Ch.14 The vertical encouragement for the churches

Consistently throughout Ch.14 John calls the churches to see and hear what he sees and hears. Just as he sees evil rising and conquering horizontally, there is a vertical countering vision that confronts the rising evil and overcomes it. **Take note of the number of times Jn says “I saw” or “I heard”.** Amid all their challenges the churches must keep their eyes on two realities. And there is encouragement in Ch.14 not only to “see and hear”, but “do” as well. The following broad encouragement categories belong to Eugene Peterson. The content though is mine. These categories are not new to Revelation but they are critical.

The war with the Dragon		
Ch.12	Ch.13	Ch.14
The war’s cosmic origin	The war’s earthly impact	Winning the war
V.1-6 Jesus’ nativity V.7-9 The war in heaven	V.1-6 The beast from the sea V.7-10 The Church	V.1-5 Witness/worship V.6-8 Proclaiming truth

V.10-12 The hymn of victory V. 13-17 The war expands	V.11-17The Beast from the earth V.18 The church	V.9-20 Holy Living
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CHAPTER 14 – winning the war

The Core:

14:1-5 Witness/Worship

Over against the hoards controlled by the evil one in Ch.13, Ch.14 presents a contrasting picture of God’s overarching sovereignty and control. John has previously discussed the throne room (Ch.4 & 5), the 144,000 sealed, gathered and worshiping at the throne (Ch.7), and the victory of the seventh trumpet (Ch.11). Here is yet another image of God’s victory. The Lamb’s followers (the 144,000 of Ch.7) standing on the Mount Zion. For the churches, overwhelmed by what they see and experience in Ch.13, Ch.14:1-5 is a needed corrective. The beast has savagely murdered many of God’s faithful followers (13:7-10), but here they are, like their Savior, not dead but alive and worshiping. To quote 1 John 4:4,

“Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.”

The churches have good reason to continue in faithful worship. Living in the world as the churches do, the chances are better than average that they are convincing themselves by what is seen that they are hopelessly outnumbered and powerless. Observing the worship in heaven is important because it moves us from the reality of what we see to the reality of what is happening in heaven. The writer to the Hebrews follows a similar tack in relation to faithfully living out the gospel in a dark world, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us (describing Heb 11), let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” (Heb 12:1). When overwhelmed by the threatening power of Satan’s deception, worship can correct us by appropriately revisioning reality. **How might vv.1-5 affect the 2 faithful churches? The 5 unfaithful ones?**

14:6-8 proclaiming the truth

Central here is the proclamation of the word (V.6, 8). The message proclaimed isn’t new, but it is essential. The churches have certainly heard God calling all people to a place of acknowledging his kingship and priority over their lives, and they have also heard that the rulers of this world are headed for judgement. These are two subjects essential for every believer to know and proclaim in their world. Proclaiming affects our sense of hearing. Messages that are very effective are both seen and heard. Proclaiming keeps the message fresh in our presence if we listen carefully.

Interestingly, in V.8 we encounter a name from the distant past – Babylon. We must remember that Babylon’s influence, although sweeping, left the world stage in 539 BC when the Persian Empire conquered Babylonia. The time gap between 539 BC and AD 95 is a full 633 years. Given this enormous gap, why bring up Babylon at all? After all Rome is the focus of John’s illustration of evil. I think the answer lies in the word “spirit.” Somehow Rome carries forward the “spirit of Babylon” to the contemporary scene in AD 95. Rome is doing what Babylon did. As John says,

“She has who all the nations drink from the wine of the passion of her immorality.”

Rome, like Babylon before her, held enormous power and influence over the rest of the world. And if you know anything about Rome, its penchant for immorality was legendary in the later stages of its history. Randy Alcorn observes,

The twentieth century is not the first to see society riddled with immorality. The ancient Greeks elevated loose women, homosexual relations, and pedophilia. The Romans gradually surrendered the strong families and morals that once made them great, replacing them with laxity and weakness. The often-made comparisons between the final years of Rome and modern day America are striking—self-indulgence, political corruption, adultery, homosexuality, sexual orgies, live sex acts in the theater, brutal sports in the arena, and a creeping family deterioration and moral laziness that led to self-destruction.

When the ruling group and the society as a whole relax their code (of sexual morality), within three generations there is usually a cultural decline, as was the case in the later stages of the Babylonian, the Persian, the Macedonian, the Mongol, the Greek, and the Roman civilizations...We find that among civilized societies those which have remained strict in their sexual codes for the longest period have reached the highest levels.

The proclamation of Babylon’s (Rome’s) fall would have been sweet music to the ears of believers being trampled under the weight of Rome’s might. There’s nothing like seeing your enemy get it’s just desserts. But the one who metes out this justice is not people, it is God. As we have observed in other places, the Bible clearly teaches that we are never to repay evil with evil. We are to, as much as possible, be at peace with all men and to leave room for God’s vengeance to satisfy our need for justice. We are not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. (Rom.12:18-21).

14:9-20 Holy Living

Believers have not received the mark of the beast, but the mark of the Lamb 14:1. Ch.14 moves the Churches from eye to ear, and from ear to hand. Here the rubber meets the road. In light of what is seen and heard, the churches need to pay attention to the matter of God’s judgement. Key here is to remember what John has just said in 13:15. The image of the beast inflicts death on those who would not worship it. But as Gregory Beale observes, the churches

need to know that the horror they faced regarding physical death at the hands of the beast was nothing compared to what those who worshiped the beast and received his mark will experience at the hands of God. So, what John teaches the churches in 14:12, 13 is very relevant,

“Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!’ ‘Yes’, says the Spirit, ‘so they may rest from their labors, for their deeds will follow them.’”

This is a clarion call to holy living based on the worship and preaching that has been seen and heard. Interestingly, John’s reference to perseverance in 14:12 takes us right back to 1:9 and 12:17, and John’s connection between suffering, kingdom, and perseverance.

Added to all this is the teaching concerning the reaper in vv.14-20. Note the pointed references once again to the temple and the angels. God’s judgement is certain and its application is precise, broad, deep, and complete. It will miss nothing and those who have harmed God’s people will suffer in ways no one can properly comprehend.

The war’s conclusion

The conclusion of the war with the dragon is brutal and vivid. The dragon and all who have relentlessly followed him meet a shocking end. They receive, for all their efforts, the cycles of judgement that end with their complete and utter defeat. They have had their hay-day, and now it’s time to pay the price for their wickedness and evil. God’s people are triumphant while worshippers of the dragon and the beast are decimated.

How might Ch.14 affect the 2 faithful churches? The 5 unfaithful ones?

Making it real:

What Ch.14 offers us is a clear illustration of the two elements John identifies in Ch.13 that the churches need to endure and triumph in the war with the dragon and the beasts. They need perseverance and wisdom. This is how they will overcome. This is how they will conquer. And they will do so because the real lamb, the slain Lamb of God leads them and lives in them.

Seeing the encouragement in isolation. (vv.1-5) Following his confrontation with the evil Jezebel who sought to slay him, Elijah ran to Mt Horeb (Mt Sinai) in utter defeat (1 Kgs 19). Dejected and isolated, he mourned his isolation, “I am the only one left”, and he wished to die. Suffering can do this to us. What Jn reminds us of in vv1-5 is that we are not alone. Like the writer to the Hebrews says, we are surrounded by witnesses to encourage us. **How important is our fellowship with other believers in practical terms?**

Hearing the encouragement in suffering. (vv.1-5) (vv. 6-8) the old cliché “Too many people worship their work, work at their play, and play at their worship” is as applicable today as ever. The point is that the relationship that too many Christians have with God is shot through with misplaced priorities. The deceptive power of the evil one is alive and well and wreaking havoc among us. We treat worship as an optional activity if something else of greater importance doesn’t supersede it. **What is the value of corporate worship?**

Doing the encouragement in opposition. (Vv.9-20) we are virtually illiterate when it comes to our Bible. As a result, we can no longer identify what sin really is. The greater problem is that we don’t particularly care about the places where compromise and caving in are impacting us. We’re far more likely to accommodate sin than stand against it. Revelation’s goal is to bring all of this into incredibly sharp relief so that the believer comes to terms with their position in Christ and what God expects by way of its outworking in behavior and relationships. Is it any wonder that John says in the beginning of this book, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.” (1:3). **what is truly different about us? What separates us from our world?**

Final thought:

John is functioning as a true Biblical prophet. The prophet’s role was certainly to talk about the future, but not primarily about that. The Biblical prophet spoke to the present needs of people, bringing God’s standards and instruction to bear on God’s people.

So, how have we unwittingly fallen to the deceptive power of the evil one and compromised our faith? Are there places where we have contemplated caving in because we have become overwhelmed by evil’s seeming triumph? Are we growing in our faith so that we are able to stand obediently as God’s priests, ministering to him as he has called us to?

If we do fall God offers us hope and forgiveness through Jesus – 1 John 1:5-10.