

# Evangelizing Your Persecutors

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### Introduction

This year Egyptian churches have been hit with wave after wave of terrorist attacks from ISIS. But church leaders there are reporting that these attacks have actually opened the door for the greatest platform for the Gospel in the history of Egypt. They believe this has happened for three reasons. First, the persecution has cleaned up the church, drawing true believers closer to the Lord and causing false believers to leave. And a clean church is a powerful church.

Secondly, every time an ISIS attack happens, there are Christians interviewed on radio and TV who have been able to give a clear presentation of the Gospel and how they are not bitter against their enemies, but actually feel sorry that their enemies are bound in anger and in bitterness. They have miraculously showcased love to their enemies.

And third, this has led countless Muslims to wonder how Christians can receive so much pain and loss and respond with grace and forgiveness. It blows them away. They know they don't have the power to do that. It makes them jealous of what Christians have. In Romans 11 Paul wanted His life to be so transformed by grace that it would make unbelievers jealous of the Gospel. Persecution has actually led to an explosive growth of Gospel-success. And this is true in other countries with even less freedom and less press coverage - countries like Iran. This was true in Ethiopia, where my parents ministered for 30 years.

Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, and today's topic is "Evangelizing our Persecutors." Do we have the heart of Christ to be able to do so?

Let me set the context again for this chapter. Three weeks ago we saw that God had raised up 144,000 missionaries in verses 1-5. Two weeks ago we looked at how angels are involved in the missions task of those missionaries in verses 6 and follow. They have the everlasting gospel; they own it; they want to see it advanced. But though angels prepare people for the Gospel

and in other ways help to advance the Gospel, they leave it to men to present the actual message of the cross. Then last week we looked at the kind of message that prepares people to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If we fail to preach on sin, judgment, and God's wrath, we undercut our message. The good news makes no sense until we understand the bad news.

Well, in verses 14-16 we see the actual harvest beginning to happen, and interestingly it is Jesus who pulls in the harvest. Does He use angels? Yes, obviously in context He does. Does He use humans? Yes. We will see that the sickle is the symbol for the human missionaries. But Jesus is the beginning and the end of all true missions. He starts this chapter as the Lamb standing on Mount Zion and ready for action and He ends this chapter by bringing a harvest of the elect into the church and a harvest of judgment for the non-elect.

So this is an essential paragraph in this chapter on missions. It doesn't matter how many missionaries you send to the field, if Jesus is not using them as His sickle, there will be no harvest. So let's go through these three verses phrase by phrase.

### **I. This passage is going to highlight something astonishing - "And behold" (v. 14a - ἰδοῦ)**

The first two words, "And behold," clue us into something that is going to be remarkable and almost unbelievable. You will remember that anywhere in this book where the Greek word ἰδοῦ occurs, something very important and very remarkable is going to be described. In fact, one translator actually translates this word as "Wow!" I prefer the translation "Behold," but "Wow!" does bring across the amazement that John has at what he is about to describe.

So what is there about this harvest that is truly amazing? It is that Jesus would be willing to continue harvesting souls for his kingdom from among those who had killed his saints; those who had vilified His name, and hated Him. Christ's love conquers the vilest and most despicable of His enemies.

And a second thing that is amazing is that the 144,000 are willing to be instruments in His hand for this harvest. They too had been persecuted by these Jews and had seen their friends and relatives killed. But the love of Christ burns so strongly in their hearts that it overcomes hatred, bitterness, anger, and aversion, and fear. It causes them to love their enemies and to evangelize their persecutors. That is what is amazing. It illustrates the supernatural love that we see in Christian evangelists in Pakistan, Egypt,

Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, North Korea, and so many other countries. You can't explain such self-sacrificing love in merely human terms. It is supernatural. And thus these verses show that it is Christ Himself who is harvesting these people. Only He could do this through these evangelists.

Just think of Paul in his pre-Christ days. His name back then was Saul of Tarsus. He hated Christ and devoted his life to destroying all of Christ's followers. He was one of the greatest persecutors of the church. And in Acts 9 we have the amazing story of Christ drawing Saul to Himself even after all that Saul had done to oppose the Gospel. And Christ used Ananias as His sickle to harvest one of Ananias' persecutors. Please turn to Acts 9 so that you can see the heart that Jesus has for even those who persecute Him and even those who bring pain to His body. Acts 9, beginning to read at verse 1.

Acts 9:1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest Acts 9:2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Acts 9:3 ¶ As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Acts 9:4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Acts 9:5 ¶ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" ¶ Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Acts 9:6 ¶ So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" ¶ Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

So Saul goes into the city and waits. In the meantime, Christ calls Ananias to preach the Gospel to Saul. Ananias is going to be the sickle. Christ does not harvest this soul by himself; he uses a prepared and sharpened sickle.

Ananias' instant reaction in verses 13-14 is to object that Saul was a persecutor of the church. "Why would you want to save Him? He is our worst enemy?" But you read Paul's letters and you realize that we were all enemies apart from grace, weren't we? Anyway, in verses 15-16 Jesus won't take "No" for an answer. He is sharpening his sickle and He is going to get His harvest. The Lord says,

"Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake."

So Christ is going to be raising up yet another sickle who is going to be evangelizing his own persecutors. He too would suffer, and He too would show forth Christ's supernatural love in reaching the lost. So Ananias preaches the Gospel to Saul, Saul gets converted and baptized, and in verses 20 and following he powerfully preaches the Gospel to the persecutors of the church. And sure enough, there is backlash. There is a threat on his life and he is smuggled out of the city of Damascus and travels to Jerusalem. Verse

26 says,

Acts 9:26 ¶ And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. Acts 9:27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

Our tendency is to run away from persecutors and to avoid them and to have an aversion to them just like these first century saints did. The natural response of Christians is not to be sickles of harvest in Christ's hands. Now, we might be willing to be sickles for destruction (verses 17-20, which we will look at next time I preach - three weeks from today). But really (to anticipate that passage), Christians will fulfill both purposes when they faithfully share God's Word. Isaiah points out that God's Word never returns void or empty. It always accomplishes God the Father's purposes. The word will bring judgment on the non-elect (and we should praise God for that purpose in verses 17-20) or it will bring salvation to the elect (and we should praise God for that purpose in these three verses). So the whole chapter hangs together beautifully.

Anyway, Ananias tried to avoid Saul, as did the disciples in Jerusalem. But God changes the hearts of His people one by one in the book of Acts, and they begin to imitate Jesus in ministering to their persecutors and winning them to Christ. And of course, Saul will become Paul, an incredible evangelist to both Jews and Gentiles. Yes, he is now evangelizing his persecutors. He is imitating Jesus Christ his Lord and Savior.

And all of this illustrates the incredible heart of Jesus towards His enemies. And Christ's heart is most amazingly set forth in Romans 9, where Christ's love for the lost is transferred into Paul's heart so strongly that Paul wished he could go to hell so that his fellow Jews could be saved. It is hard to imagine this kind of compassion and burden for the lost. I will freely admit that I don't have that yet. I cannot honestly say that I would be willing to go to hell if it would mean that others would be saved. But that just shows how shallow my experience of Christ's love really is. The compassion Paul has is something that only Christ could produce. But listen to Paul as he insists that he is not lying or exaggerating in any way. He says,

Rom. 9:1 I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, Rom. 9:2 that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart.

Rom. 9:3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh...

To be accursed from Christ means to be sent to hell. It means to suffer as Christ suffered. That shows that Christ is working in Paul's heart to have

such compassion. In Romans 10:1 Paul says again, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved."

Brothers and sisters, that is the reason Revelation 14:14-16 starts with a "Wow!" After years of the Jewish citizens rejecting Jesus, despising Jesus, and persecuting Jesus, He still draws many of them to Himself. It's amazing! No doubt many of these Jews that were being harvested had tortured and killed his precious saints. They had been hateful to anything Jesus stood for. Their writings about Jesus that we looked at in previous chapters were absolutely blasphemous. It was common knowledge that the rabbis had mocked Jesus and pronounced curses upon Him, such as consigning Jesus to boil in excrement for eternity. Yet Jesus draws them to Himself as a precious possession. Wow! Amazing grace. It is a display of grace that ought to make our hearts melt. Last week we saw the glories of Christ's wrath and judgment. This week I hope you stand in awe of the glories of His mercy, love, and compassion to the elect, who were just as much enemies as the non-elect were.

And I guess I should have pointed out why I believe this is a harvest from Israel. It is because of the Greek phrase,  $\tau\eta\varsigma \gamma\eta\varsigma$ , which is used three times in these three verses. Pickering translates it as "the earth" but we have been seeing that throughout the book, it refers to the land of Israel. There is nothing in them that would warrant such favor. No wonder John wants us to behold or to gaze in wonder and awe at what is being described in these verses. He just stares at this vision with a "Wow!"

## **II. The white cloud = the glory cloud = the kingdom of heaven**

Verse 14 goes on: "I saw a white cloud..." We have been seeing that the white cloud was the glory cloud of God's presence; the same glory cloud that was manifested to Israel under Moses. So it is God's kingdom coming to earth and His sovereignty manifested in salvation. The glory cloud of the Old Testament was associated with God's throne in the earthly temple - the mercy seat. So it is a symbol of sovereignty and kingdom. Meredith Kline's book, *Images of the Spirit*, shows that Scripture ties millions of angels with the glory cloud. So it won't just be Christ invading earth, but angels invading earth, and the kingdom of kingdom of heaven as a whole poised to invade the earth more and more.

### **III. sitting on a cloud = sovereignty/kingship in action (think of a chariot - Ps. 68:4; Is. 19:1; etc.)**

And this idea that it is heaven invading earth is strengthened by the next phrase, "and someone like a son of man sitting on the cloud..." Let's look at the second part of that clause, "sitting on the cloud." Whenever God is said to sit on a cloud in the Old Testament He is taking action. Many commentators have pointed out that the cloud is like a chariot-throne. He rides on a cloud to bring salvation and He rides on a cloud to bring judgment. For example, Isaiah 19:1 says, "Behold, Yehowah rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt..." It is God invading a nation either for blessing or for judgment. So Yeatts says that this image of sitting must indicate that Christ is traveling or riding somewhere to take action.<sup>1</sup>

Well, that fits with the contrast that you see between verse 1 and this verse. Verse 1 has Jesus standing on Mount Zion, indicating He is ready for action, but this has Him sitting on the cloud. Why the difference? I believe it is because Christ is preparing to ride His chariot cloud in full sovereignty and kingship to conquer this world for Himself. And His sovereign actions involve not only the positive harvest for salvation in these verses but also the action of treading out the grapes of wrath in verses 17-20. This begins His conquest of the land of Canaan, so to speak. AD 30 is symbolized by Moses and Israel coming out of Egypt and being promised the land in the future. AD 30-70 are parallel to the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. And AD 70 and beyond is crossing the Jordan and conquering the land. That's why AD 70 is so significant. And since clouds are associated with heaven, and whiteness with the purity of heaven, this is a beautiful symbol of heaven invading earth for either blessing or judgment.

### **IV. "someone like a son of man" (v. 14c) = Daniel 7:13 = equals Christ receiving all kingdoms**

But the unusual language used of "someone like a son of man sitting on the cloud" would have immediately made the first century readers think of Daniel 7:13. And as far as I am concerned, that settles the debate of whether this person is Jesus or is an angel. It has to be Jesus, and the vast majority of commentators agree.<sup>2</sup> The objection of a few is that it is inconceivable that

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1 Various authors see travel as involved. For example, Yeatts says, "In the scriptures, clouds are the vehicle of travel for God (Ps. 18:11-12; 104:3; Matt. 17:5) and Christ (Acts 1:9-10). In Revelation, the two witnesses go up into heaven on a cloud (11:12), and here Christ comes to judge on a white cloud." John R. Yeatts, Revelation, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 271.

2 A small sampling of commentators who take this as referring to Jesus would be: Alford, Henry. Alford's

an angel could ever command Jesus to do anything, yet verse 15 says that the angel does indeed command the person sitting on the cloud to thrust in His sickle and reap, and the one sitting on that cloud does exactly that in verse 16. So based on that fact they reason that the one sitting on the cloud must be another angel.<sup>3</sup> I won't get into all the exegetical arguments each way. In one sense it doesn't matter, since even those who say it is an angel agree that this angel has to be a personal representative of Jesus. But I agree with Dusterdieck who says, the objection that Christ himself could not have received a command from an angel, is settled by the fact that the angel is only the bearer of the command coming from God.<sup>4</sup> I'm skipping ahead to a later point, but where does the angel come from in verse 15? He comes from the heavenly temple; he comes from the throne of God. He is a messenger of God the Father. So it is really the Father who is giving this command. So these verses illustrate what Jesus said in John 6 over and over - that He would only save those whom the Father gave to Him and that His only mission is to do the Father's will. Let me read you some examples from John 6.

John 6:37 All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. John 6:38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do My

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Greek Testament, an Exegetical and Critical Commentary. Vol. 4. 1875. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980; Beckwith, Isbon T. The Apocalypse of John. New York: MacMillan, 1919; reprinted, Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001; Caird, G. B. A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine. Black's New Testament Commentaries, edited by Henry Chadwick. London: Adam & Charles Black, 1966; Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe. The Book of the Revelation. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990; Ladd, George Eldon. A Commentary of the Revelation of John. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972; Lenski, R. C. H. The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963; Mounce, Robert H. The Book of Revelation. Revised ed. The New International Commentary on the New Testament, edited by F. F. Bruce and Gordon D. Fee. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977; Beale, G. K. The Book of Revelation, A Commentary on the Greek Text. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999; Bruce, F. F. The Revelation to John. A New Testament Commentary, edited by G. C. D. Howley. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969; Swete, Henry Barclay. Commentary on Revelation. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977; Bratcher, Robert G. and Howard A. Hatton. A Handbook on The Revelation to John. New York: The United Bible Societies, 1993; Walvoord, John F. The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Chicago: Moody, 1966; Moses Stuart, A Commentary on the Apocalypse, vol. 2 (Andover; New York: Allen, Morrill and Wardwell; M. H. Newman, 1845), 301.

- 3 For example, Morris, Leon. The Book of Revelation, an Introduction and Commentary. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Revised Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987; Aune, David E. Revelation. Word Biblical Commentary, Vols. 52a and 52b, edited by Ralph p. Martin. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997 and 1998; Robert James Utley, Hope in Hard Times - The Final Curtain: Revelation, vol. Volume 12, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2001), 105.
- 4 Friedrich Dusterdieck, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John, trans. Henry E. Jacobs, Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1887), 401. Beale says, "But probably only a functional subordination to God is in mind since the angel merely conveys a divine message from God's throne room, which is located in the heavenly temple: "he came out from the temple" (for  $\nu\acute{o}\varsigma$  as figurative for God's presence see 3:12; 7:15; 11:19; 21:22; see on 11:1-2; 16:17 has "a great voice from the temple from the throne"; so also 16:1). Christ must be informed by God about the time for judgment to begin." G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 772.



own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. John 6:39 This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.

So Jesus does the Father's will. He only saves (or harvests) those whom the Father has elected. If you want to get into esoteric theology, this is yet another verse that settles the debate between four point Calvinists and five point Calvinists. Four-pointers claim that there is a tension between God's election and Christ's desire to save everyone. That is a false tension. Jesus only and always and perfectly carries out the Father's will. In these three verses He saves the elect and loves them and in verses 17-20 He judges and pours out His wrath on the non-elect. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are perfectly united in true five-point Calvinism. And this is symbolized in our passage by the angel bringing the Father's command from His throne and Jesus fulfilling the Father's will.

So I have dealt with verse 15 prematurely. But back to the identity of this one like a son of man, if you turn to Revelation 1:13, I want to show you the two other times this phrase is used in exactly this way. Revelation 1:13 says, "and in the midst of the seven lampstands one like a son of man, clothed down to the feet and girded at the chest with a golden belt." Everyone agrees that "one like a son of man" in this verse is a reference to Jesus. Next, turn to Daniel 7:13 for the other occasion, and this is really what is in the background to both passages in Revelation. John is alluding to Daniel 7.

Dan. 7:13 "I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like a Son of Man [the New King James says "the Son of Man" but there is no article. It is literally "a Son of Man"], Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. Dan. 7:14 Then 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 the one Which shall not be destroyed.

So if this is fulfilled in AD 70, then it means that AD 70 and beyond is the time when Jesus will gradually draw all peoples, nations, and languages to Himself. This is a definitive turning point in receiving the nations. Like I said earlier, while the previous 40 years was equivalent to the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness in the book of Numbers (including a falling away of the church), AD 70 was equivalent to the crossing of the Jordan when the land of Canaan was given to Joshua - the type of Jesus.

And beautifully, Jesus starts with Israel. It has been treated as a pagan nation no better than Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon, so He is going to begin by converting people from this nation. He will make it clear in verses 17-20 that the whole nation will not yet convert. Only a remnant will convert during the next few centuries. In God's program the conversion of the nation as a whole

will have to wait till the future. But He starts with the conversion of an ongoing remnant.

## **V. golden crown (στέφανον) = victory crown**

The next phrase in verse 14 of our chapter says, "having on his head a golden crown." Gold is a symbol for deity, and sitting on the cloud is a symbol of deity. That's why when Jesus said that before that generation died they would see Him coming on the clouds of heaven, the Pharisees said it was blasphemy, because they knew "the one like a Son of Man" in Daniel 7:13 was a divine figure. So this gold is another symbol of His deity.

But the specific word used for crown in the Greek is στέφανον. It is a victory crown worn by a conquering general or king. Again, this could be good news or bad news, or both. In this chapter it is both. But where His sitting on the cloud symbolizes His kingship and sovereignty being exercised in specific actions, His golden crown represents His victory. So this is not a futile attempt to bring in more harvest. This will be successful. He is coming in victory. He is never defeated in His purposes for evangelism.

## **VI. sharp sickle = His instruments of harvest (the 144,000 evangelists)**

The next instrument was an instrument of harvest for wheat - "and in his hand a sharp sickle." Christ would begin reaping a harvest of souls from Israel and then from every nation in the world. And as I have already pointed out, his tools for harvest were the 144,000. So the sharp sickle is a symbol of these remnant of Jews that had been preserved for one purpose - to have their lives burn out in sharing the gospel.

## **VII. The order to reap is delivered from the Father by an angel (v. 15a)**

Verse 15 continues: "And another angel came out of the temple..." Angels are messengers, so this messenger is bringing a message from the temple to Christ. The temple is God's throne room. So Christ takes the conquest on behalf of His Father, but He also receives a message from His Father. His task is to do the Father's will. And that should be our goal as well - to serve the Father by serving His Son. And I already dealt with that phrase earlier in its other implications.

## **VIII. the loud voice indicates an urgency to the harvest (v. 15b)**

Verse 15 says that this angel cries with a loud voice. That is symbolic of the urgency of the message. Missions in-gathering is indeed an urgent task. God's glory depends upon it; Christ's honor depends upon it. The Great Commission is our central task in history. Do we share that sense of urgency? Do we long to see the nations converted?

## **IX. The message is to the Son**

But He cries out with a loud voice "to the one sitting on the cloud..." So there is an order in missions. The Father gives the elect to Jesus. Jesus harvests the elect by sending out his missionaries and angels.

But the fact that Christ is the central figure here shows that missions could not happen without Christ working through us supernaturally. When he calls missionaries to missions, they must go. But He equips them, He sharpens them, and He prepares them to do the task. He is the Alpha and the Omega of missions. And I have talked about the implications of that adequately in my sermon on the first five verses.

## **X. the time to reap has come and the harvest is ripe (v. 15c)**

And the message is, "Thrust in your sickle and reap, for the time to reap has come because the harvest of the earth [or land] is dry."

In light of the last three sermons on missions I find this statement significant. God Himself had prepared his elect for the Gospel through His judgments. His elect had experienced the wrath of His judgments and were about to experience His love. God had ground every idol that the Jewish nation had trusted in into dust. He destroyed those idols. When citizens went through the war unsuccessfully and then found that the Jewish government had become turncoat and were now enforcing Roman tyranny, it took the wind out of their sails. Everything they had previously trusted in was now in flames. And it was this that made them ripe for harvest. They were spiritually dry and ready for the refreshing grace of Jesus. All humanistic solutions they had tried had failed them and they were now ready for Christ's true solutions.

I think it is a wonderful thing to watch humanism crumbling under its own weight. The question is, "Are we prepared to pick up the pieces and to give

Christ's solutions?" I think some of you young people are getting more ready than us older generation. It does my heart good to hear you talking naturally about the Reformed worldview as if it is the air you breath. And several of you are getting out there like Mary Anne and sharing your worldview. But all of us must be prepared to give an answer to those who ask us of the hope that is in us; to be a sickle to get into the harvest.

So, from my perspective, these verses are a wonderful conclusion to the preparatory work that we have been looking at in the first 13 verses. With nowhere else to turn, first century Jews had two options - to increase their anger against Jesus and receive further judgments in verses 17-20 or to repent and be received into His glorious kingdom. Well, it is obvious that these were the ones being received into the kingdom.

## **XI. the land (Israel = τῆς γῆς) was harvested once again (v. 16)**

Verse 16 says, "So the one sitting on the cloud swung his sickle upon the earth, and the earth was harvested." When He swings His sickle, the harvest always happens. As soon as Jesus unleashed His instruments of harvest (the 144,000) back into Israel, people started coming to Christ. This was the beginning of Daniel 7:13-14 being fulfilled. This was the beginning of the harvest of the nations into the church. It is quite different from the negative harvest in verses 17-20. Caird's commentary points out that the Greek word for "harvest" is always used for a positive in-gathering, not for mowing down enemies.<sup>5</sup> Now, that may be exaggerated because I think it is the same message that results in salvation or judgment. But certainly the language used here is used in Luke 10:2 and John 4:35-38 as a metaphor for evangelism. And I agree with Caird and others on that point. I'll just read the Luke 10:2 passage:

Luke 10:2 Then He said to them, "The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves.

They were being sent out to evangelize their persecutors. And their work was called a harvest.

Another clue we have of the positive nature of this harvest is given by Ian Boxall. He says,

The harvest of the earth picks up on the description of the one hundred and forty-four

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5 Ford says, "Caird, p. 190, observes that Gr. therismos, 'harvest,' and therizō, 'to harvest,' are used for in-gathering, not for mowing down, as enemies." J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, vol. 38, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 238.

thousand as 'first-fruits' for God and the Lamb (14:4), while the treading of the winepress associated with the grape harvest explicitly picks up on the wine of Babylon, and the corresponding cup of God's anger (14:8, 10)... In short, the vision described here is a vision of salvation, in contrast to what is yet to come.<sup>6</sup>

So this begins a harvest of evangelism that will not culminate until the end of our age - an age associated with the harvest imagery of the Feast of Tabernacles. We are in the age started with the Feast of Tabernacles, as is so clearly illustrated by Zachariah 14. In fact, let me go down a rabbit trail and deal with the feasts of Israel in the book of Revelation. All of the feasts are alluded to in this book. The Feast of Tabernacles was the last Feast associated with the temple, and it prophesied that once the temple was destroyed, Israel would be scattered to the four winds (symbolized by Jews living in temporary booths or shelters made of branches - showing that they were scattered and didn't have a home) and that during this age all the nations would be saved (symbolized by seventy bulls that were sacrificed during that festival for what was symbolically known as the 70 nations of the world). So that feast shows that while Israel would be scattered to the four winds, with only a remnant being saved, the Gospel would gather in all nations of the world until the next festival (Purim) would signal the salvation of Israel as a nation and even greater blessings to the nations. Purim is the last symbolic feast, and it is still in our future. So there is a perfect order in all the feasts.

Hannukah is the first one, and points to Christ's birth. Passover, unleavened bread, and firstfruits points to Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Pentecost points to the gift of the Holy Spirit. Trumpets points to the war against Israel. Yom Kippur points to the ending of the temple. Tabernacles points to Israel being scattered among the nations and God taking a people to Himself from the Gentiles, with every Gentile nation being converted. And Purim, the last feast, points to the conversion of the nation of Israel in the future and even greater blessing to the Gentile nations as a result.

## Conclusion

So enough said on the meaning of the passage. But let me end with three more applications.

First, if Christ and the 144,000 could harvest a remnant from this wicked nation despite being persecuted, we ought to be willing to share the Gospel with those who are mean to us. We ought to be willing to be the sickle that Christ uses. Of course, that takes Christ's heart being lived out through us by

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2006), 213.

grace. We can't do that on our own. The incredible compassion Paul had for his fellow Jews in Romans 9 is not something we can produce on our own. And by the way, you don't have to wish you would go to hell to experience some degree of Christ's compassion. But any compassion for the lost takes the King of the Harvest, Jesus, loving them through us. And you could pray that He would do that more and more in our congregation. Romans 8 says that God can shed abroad His supernatural love in our hearts to enable us to love our enemies, to be kind to those who have been mean to us, and to evangelize those who do not deserve it. It is passages like this that remind me that none of us deserve the Gospel. All of us were enemies until God's grace conquered our hearts. So let us be more like Jesus in loving those who hate us and to be willing to be a tool of harvest in the hands of Jesus Christ.

Second, if Christ is wearing the victory crown and if we live in the era that Daniel 7:13-14 prophesied would end up Christianizing the whole planet, then we can have incredible hope that the Great Commission will be a success. Jesus promised, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Gates are defensive mechanisms. He wants the church to batter down the gates of hell. We need to be on the offensive. So there is no excuse for pessimism or discouragement. This passage calls us to be a people of faith and hope. Even the demonic is no match for a church of faith.

Third, be sensitive to who is ready for harvest and who is not. If even Jesus was sensitive and waited till the grain was dry and ripe for harvest, we shouldn't pick green fruit. In other words, there is no point in using high pressure sales techniques to get professions of faith in missions. That's man-centered and Arminian. That will only produce psychological conversions, not true conversions. Look for those whom God has prepared to be receptive and confidently share with them. You don't need to shove religion down their throats. After all, Jesus said that no one could come to Him unless the Father draws them.

Now, it doesn't mean you can't share the Gospel with everyone. You can. But don't be discouraged when your sharing ends up making people more hostile and more ready for the negative harvest of verses 17-20. Don't get discouraged. Pray to the Lord of the Harvest to open up divine opportunities for you to share your faith, and as He prepares people for the Gospel, be confident that Christ can use you as His sickle. Amen. Let's pray.