

## “HEAVEN AND EARTH IN JUXTAPOSITION”

### I. Introduction

- A. Throughout our study of this great book, we have repeatedly noted that one of its key features is that it provides us with a heavenly perspective on life in the earthly sphere.
1. John’s Apocalypse is an unveiling, a pulling back of the curtain that otherwise prevents us from seeing the connection between the earthly and the heavenly realms.
  2. Heaven is the realm within the created order where God is present in a unique way, seated on his throne and surrounded by his angelic hosts.
  3. While God is also enthroned over the earthly sphere, the veil that divides heaven and earth prevents us from seeing everything in subjection to him.
- B. In Revelation 14, John receives a series of visions that set heaven and earth in juxtaposition to each other.
1. Here we are given a wonderful picture of the glories that await the redeemed in the new creation, as well as a sobering picture of the judgment that is hanging over this present evil age.
  2. The image of the saints in heaven is set in contrast to the vision of the two beasts in chapter 13, through which Satan makes war against the saints on earth.
  3. And the reason why the chapter concludes with a depiction of the final judgment is because it marks the end of another cycle of visions.

### II. The Song in Heaven

- A. In the first part of the chapter, John sees a vision of the Lamb on Mount Zion with all his saints, who are represented symbolically here by the 144,000 from chapter 7 who had been sealed to ensure their perseverance through the Great Tribulation.
1. The name "Mount Zion" is not referring to the literal Mount Zion in Jerusalem but to the spiritual reality that it represents, which is God's unshakeable kingdom.
  2. Though the kingdoms of this world will all totter and fall, the kingdom that is established on Zion will endure forever.
  3. This assures us, as those whose true dwelling is in heaven, of the security that we enjoy as Christ's people.
- B. The picture of the saints in these verses stands in contrast to what was said about the followers of the beast in chapter 13.
1. While they were marked on their foreheads and hands with the name of the beast, believers are marked on their foreheads with the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father.
  2. This mark signifies ownership and loyalty.
  3. Our lives are not our own.
  4. We belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.
  5. This is the same thing that is signified in our baptism, when we are marked by the name of the Triune God.
- C. As we saw in our study of chapter 7, 144,000 is not to be seen as a literal number but as a symbolic one that represents all of God's people across history.
1. 144,000 is the product of 12 times 12 times 1,000.

2. Twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel as well as the number of apostles appointed by Christ during his public ministry.
  3. 1,000 is the figure that signifies a great number that is known to the Lord alone.
  4. Notice especially that the number of the redeemed here is the exact same number as those who were sealed back in chapter 7.
  5. Not one of those whom God has appointed to eternal life will be lost.
  6. Every single one of the sheep given for Christ to save will be brought into his fold and kept there forever.
- D. In chapters 12 and 13, the emphasis was upon the people of God as the church militant, engaged in warfare against the dragon who has been thrown down to the earth.
1. In this chapter the focus is upon the people of God as the church triumphant, enjoying the consummated state of their redemption in heaven.
  2. John says that as he gazes upon this scene, he hears a voice like the roar of many waters and loud thunder, which he also describes as the sound of harpists playing their harps.
  3. It is simultaneously overwhelming and beautiful.
  4. The source of this peculiar audible phenomenon is the singing of the saints before God's throne in heaven.
  5. If you have ever been to Niagara Falls, the sound of the falls gives some sense of what John is describing here.
  6. Or you might think of those times when you have been in a packed sanctuary and it seemed that every single person was singing a well-known hymn as fervently as they could.

7. As powerful as those experiences can be, they are only pale reflections of what awaits us in glory.
- E. The song that the saints are singing is called “a new song.”
1. It is so named because it is celebrating a new stage in redemptive history.
  2. These saints are praising God for the consummation of their salvation.
  3. And John tells us that only the redeemed can sing this new song.
  4. In public worship in this world, anyone who wants to join in singing the hymns can do so.
  5. This means there can be times when those who do not have true saving faith praise God with their lips but not with their hearts.
  6. It will not be so in the world to come.
  7. The only people who will be able to sing the new song will be those who have experienced the redemption that it celebrates.
- F. The other thing to note about the first part of chapter 14 is the way believers are described here.
1. They are referred to as those “redeemed from the earth.”
  2. A Christian’s true citizenship is not in this world but in heaven.
  3. As the apostle Paul puts it in Colossians 1, God “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.”
  4. This reminds us that our salvation includes the notion of being separated out from the world.

5. Even though we still live in the world, we are not to be of the world.
- G. Believers are also described as those “who have not defiled themselves with women.”
1. This is not saying that there is anything inherently impure about sexual intercourse.
  2. Nor does it mean that those who are celibate form a special class of Christians.
  3. Virginity is being used symbolically here to depict moral and spiritual purity.
  4. This underscores that God’s people are not ensnared by the wiles of the harlot Babylon, who is described later in the chapter.
- H. Christians are also marked by the fact that they follow the Lamb wherever he goes and that no lie is found in their mouths.
1. To be a disciple of Christ is to follow in his footsteps.
  2. It is to be conformed to his likeness.
  3. It is to testify to the truth.
- I. Lastly, the 144,000 are called “firstfruits for God.”
1. Often in the Bible, the firstfruits is symbolic of a greater harvest that is yet to come.
  2. This has led some to contend that the 144,000 do not represent all of God’s people but only a select group of them.
  3. But there is another sense in which the notion of firstfruits is used to describe God’s people in Scripture.

4. For example, Jeremiah 2:3 says, "Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest."
5. Likewise, James 1:18 says, "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."
6. Both of these passages refer to all of God's people as the firstfruits.
7. The same thing is being done here in Revelation 14.
8. Believers are called the firstfruits because they are the first and best part of the harvest of the earth.
9. Of course, we are not "best" because of anything in us but because of the grace shown to us by God.
10. We have been set apart and reserved for the Lord.
11. As we see in the remainder of the chapter, the rest of the harvest will be gathered for judgment.
12. The firstfruits are taken out before that judgment comes.

### III. The Pronouncements Made on Earth

- A. We turn now to the second part of the chapter, which begins in verse 6.
  1. Here the focus shifts from heaven back to earth.
  2. John tells us that he saw an angel flying overhead and proclaiming an eternal gospel to those who dwell on the earth.
  3. We might be surprised that this would be described as a "gospel," since there is no mention of Jesus or the way of salvation.
  4. The angel simply calls people to fear God and give him glory, warning them that the hour of judgment is at hand.

5. In what sense is this “good news”?
  6. Well, it is certainly good news for Christ’s people.
  7. As long as this present age continues, we have to endure opposition from the world.
  8. We eagerly await the day of judgment because for us it is the day of vindication.
- B. The other sense in which the angel’s pronouncement can be understood as “good news” is because it conveys that there is still time to repent.
1. This is a warning to those who trust in Babylon, calling them to turn to the true and living God before it is too late.
  2. As long as they belong to the category of “those who dwell on the earth,” they are captivated by the world and its charms.
  3. They are consumed by the entertainments, and pleasures, and distractions that the world has to offer.
  4. They are oblivious to the dreadful fate that is about to fall upon this world.
  5. They need to heed the call to stop worshipping created things and turn in faith to the One who created everything that exists.
  6. The first angel’s message is symbolic of the preaching of the gospel throughout the church age.
- C. The second angel that John sees makes the following announcement:  
“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.”
1. The name Babylon is being used symbolically here.

2. Some have argued that it is symbolic of Jerusalem, since the majority of the Jews rejected Christ.
  3. The problem with that interpretation is that it is difficult to see how first century Israel could be described as making all nations drink of her sexual immorality.
  4. It makes better sense to say that in John's immediate context Babylon was a symbol for Rome and its imposition of emperor worship on all of its subjects.
  5. And this symbol continues to have further embodiments throughout history, as various nations use their power and influence to spread falsehood and immorality.
- D. The third angel that John sees declares that all of those whose lives are bound up with this world, all of those who are marked by the name of the beast, will share in the judgment that is about to come upon the beast.
1. The image employed to describe this judgment is that of being made to drink the wine of God's wrath at full strength.
  2. While drinking wine is frequently used as an image of blessing in the Bible, this is clearly not the case here.
  3. The point of this symbolism is that this wine is so strong that it will render those who drink it utterly helpless.
  4. This image then gives way to another image, that of being tormented with fire and sulphur for all eternity.
  5. This is clearly a picture of hell.
  6. And notice how this description of hell corrects a misconception that many Christians have about hell.
  7. It is often said that hell is a matter of being separated from God for all eternity.



8. That is not exactly right.
  9. Verse 10 tells us that the torment of hell will be experienced “in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.”
  10. Hell is about being separated from the favorable presence of God and eternally exposed to the unmitigated wrath of God.
- E. After giving this picture of the dreadful future that lies in store for those who worship the beast, John then offers two words of encouragement for believers.
1. First, he calls us to endure, to keep God’s commandments, and to keep our faith in Jesus.
  2. Being reminded of the eternal torment that awaits the wicked impresses upon us the seriousness of what is at stake.
  3. We must not give in to the pressure to conform to the world.
  4. And even if we have to suffer on account of our faithfulness, we can be certain that we will be vindicated in the end.
- F. The second encouragement comes in verse 14, where John hears this benediction announced from heaven: “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!”
1. To die in the Lord is to be released from the duty of spiritual combat and to be brought into the presence of Christ in heaven.
  2. As long as we remain in this world, we have to engage in the labors of Christian discipleship in a world that hates Christ.
  3. But when our days in this world reach their appointed end, we will enter into our eternal rest.

#### IV. The Harvest of the Earth

- A. This brings us to the third part of the chapter, which begins in verse 14.
1. Here we are given a picture of two harvests.
  2. The first harvest is reaped by one who appears seated on a cloud, one like a son of man.
  3. This is obviously referring to Christ, employing the imagery from the Messianic prophecy in Daniel 7.
  4. In John's vision, Christ has a sharp sickle in his hand and is told by an angel to reap the harvest of the earth.
  5. While it may seem inappropriate for an angel to be issuing a command to Christ, we have to remember that this is a vision and that the angels simply function as divine heralds.
  6. The angel is announcing what God had already decreed.
  7. The question that arises about this harvest is whether it is an image of judgment or of the gathering of the saints into heaven.
  8. It seems to me that the latter is more likely.
  9. If so, this is another depiction of what was described as the gathering of the firstfruits in verse 4.
- B. The reaping that is done by the second angel at the command of the third angel is clearly a picture of judgment.
1. Notice that the third angel comes from the altar, which was the place where the prayers of the saints ascended.
  2. This tells us that this is the final answer to their prayers for vindication.
  3. The gathering of the wicked for judgment is depicted through the image of a grape harvest.

4. The reason why this image is employed is made clear by what follows.
5. The grapes are thrown into the great winepress of the wrath of God, producing a lake of blood that is as high as a horse's bridle for 1,600 stadia, or about 184 miles.
6. Like the other numbers in Revelation, this too is symbolic, emphasizing the totality of this judgment.
7. 1,600 is the product of 4 times 4 times 10 times 10.
8. Four is the number of global totality in Revelation, and ten is the number of completeness.
9. The idea conveyed is the full and final judgment of the world.

## V. Conclusion

- A. This chapter calls our attention to the sharp contrast between the eternal destinies of those whose dwelling place is in heaven and those whose dwelling place is on the earth.
- B. While heaven is a world of consummate blessing, hell is a world of untempered misery.
- C. The fact that there is a hell should motivate us to persevere in faith and strive to tell others of their need to embrace Christ by faith.
- D. And the fact that in heaven we will enjoy a perfect blessedness such as no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has ever imagined should make us long for the day when we will enter into that glorious rest.