

The Great Harvest | Revelation 14

Have you ever wondered: *Does what I do in life really matter in a world that seems so beyond our control?* As we come to chapter 14 of the *Book of Revelation*, this question would have regularly been on the minds of the churches John was writing to. As groups of only a few dozen Jesus-followers scattered here and there throughout the Roman Empire, facing constant persecution at the hands of unjust power, politics, and propaganda, many of them would have often wondered: *Does anything I do in this life – especially in trying to be a faithful follower of Jesus – really matter or make a difference in the grand scheme of things?* And in Revelation 14, amidst the ongoing apocalyptic storytelling and Old Testament imagery of the *Book of Revelation*, John seeks to paint a picture that would have revealed an unexpected and surprising answer to his original audience – and perhaps, to us today.

Now to help us discover how John speaks to this existential question in Revelation 14, first we need to work through the main sections of the text together to discover a few related questions that eventually build to John's revelation about whether or not the day-to-day actions of our lives make any real difference in a world that often seems beyond our control.

As John begins chapter 14, he knows that one thing constantly on the minds of his listeners was: *What about our friends and family who have already suffered and died because of their loyalty to Jesus? Cause it looks like they've lost the battle... And whatever they had tried to do for Jesus in this life, now doesn't seem to have amounted to much...*

It's with these questions in mind that John begins Revelation 14 by saying (v1a):

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion...

After two chapters speaking of dragons, beasts, and wars – oh my! – John intentionally turns his readers' attention back to the main character of the story: *the Lamb*.

That while evil may have continued to rage all around them, when you paused long enough to look, the Lamb was still standing on centre stage. In fact, where the Lamb is standing in chapter 14 illustrates a significant contrast to the dragon of John's earlier chapters. Where the dragon was described as standing on *the sand* of the shore in Revelation 13, the Lamb is standing on *the rock* of a mountain – a subtle yet significant nod to Jesus' teaching on the difference between temporary and eternal foundations to build our lives on. And the Lamb's standing not just any mountain, but on *Mount Zion* – the symbol in Jewish tradition of *God's Mountain*, of God's eternal and unshakable home for God's people.

And that's exactly what John saw next, as he writes (v1b, 4b):

...and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. They were purchased from among the human race and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb.

We first heard of the "144,000" in Revelation 7, symbolizing the people God had redeemed and protected from the consequences of sin and evil. But like the symbolic nature of all numbers in Revelation, we learned that the "144,000" actually represented an uncountable multitude "*from every nation, tribe, people and language.*" That while the Jesus-movement may have *seemed* small and insignificant in their day-to-day experience compared to the size, strength, and power of Rome, John looked and saw countless people who had been so faithful to Jesus that they were now standing on centre stage with the Lamb in the eternal and unshakable presence of God.

And John goes on to describe them as "firstfruits to God." In the Old Testament, *firstfruits* referred to the first portion of an agricultural harvest that served as a celebratory sign of the full harvest that was still on its way. And so, the firstfruits were presented to God as an offering of thanksgiving and celebration.

And here, John wants his listeners to know that those who have gone before them in suffering and death – especially, because of their allegiance to Jesus – were not only standing safe and secure with the Lamb, but were actually a sign of something greater still to come. Something eternally significant that God still had in store. That when considering the meaning of their lives and actions, those who had died in faith had not died in vain, but were now standing strong with the Lamb as a sign to John’s readers of something yet to come.

Then, as we come to the second section of chapter 14, John begins to play with the questions: *But what about everything still going on around us right here and right now? What about the empire that seems to be winning on every side and making us feel so insignificant? Shouldn’t we just give up and give in? You know, if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em?*

Well, in response to these questions, John describes three angels with three important and interrelated messages. First, in verse 6, it says (v6-7):

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the 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 who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

On the heels of the reminder that countless people had already been faithful to Jesus – and therefore were *firstfruits* of something God still had in store – these three angels now bring messages specifically intended for those who were living and active in the church today. And this first angel is described as having the “eternal gospel.” *Gospel* meaning “good news.” A “good news” for all people everywhere telling them that *the time is now* to turn to God in reverence and worship. While John uses rather heavenly and apocalyptic language here, he’s actually echoing the exact same simple but seismic gospel that Jesus shared in his very first words ever recorded in the book of Mark, when Jesus declared (1:15):

The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!

That to those few dozen Jesus-followers, while it might not have been obvious on the *nightly news*, the *real news* was that God's kingdom was present and at work right there among them. That Jesus' invitation was still on offer and was still something they could share with others. That even though life was hard, and some had suffered and died, and the evil empire seemed to keep winning on every side, everything Jesus had said and done was still timely and true. That the time was now to both live and share the eternal good news of the kingdom of God. In fact, despite the appearances around them, the next angel went even further to say (v8):

“‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great,’ which made all the nations drink of her passionate immorality.”

Now, for any history buffs in the room, you'll know that the Babylonian empire fell to the Persians in sixth-century BC, over six hundred years before the writing of Revelation. But because of the trauma Israel experienced when they had been conquered and exiled by the Babylonians in 587 BC, “Babylon” had become an enduring symbol and code word in the Jewish imagination for any and all oppressive empires – and in the case of Revelation, the code word for *Rome*. Which makes the angel's declaration a bit odd... That if *Babylon* means *Rome*, but Rome is still reigning, “Babylon is fallen” sounds like *fake news*...

Yet, with the backdrop of the Lamb on Mount Zion, this angel declares that, despite all appearances, “Babylon” has already lost. That the ways of worldly power, politics, and propaganda – whether through Babylon or Rome or your global-superpower-of-choice – the ways of Babylon are only ever always destined to fail. To collapse in on themselves. That just like Babylon fell to the Persians, the *ways of Babylon* meant game-over for Rome.

And in light of this guaranteed defeat, the third angel then declares (v9-10a):

If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's anger.

Now a few important things to note from a passage like this... First, that as we learned last week, this is not a reference to some literal mark on the forehead or hand, but a symbol of what *marks* our lives – what *mark* we leave on the world by the way *we live* (getting us that much closer to John's response to our question). That our lives will either be marked by the way of the Lamb or the way of the beast, depending on which we “worship” – which one we make the centre of our attention and ambitions. Which one we build our lives on. And when this angel, through John, says that lives marked by the way of the beast will “*drink the wine of God's anger*” – or in some translations, “wrath” – it's a reminder that God cares deeply about dealing with evil and injustice, and is passionate about keeping our lives from being destroyed by them as well (a theme we'll see again before the end of Revelation 14).

And this all now brings us to the crux of the passage and the question at hand. That if those who have gone before us have not died in vain. And if, like Jesus said, the time is *still* now to turn to God's kingdom. And if, while it may look like the ways of empire – of earthly kingdoms – are winning, it actually turns out *Babylon has fallen*. Then what significance, if any, do my life and my actions have in the here and now?

And in the middle of chapter 14, John gets to his answer by repeating a refrain from last week. But this time with a bonus tag line, said to be spoken by the very Spirit of God, saying (v12, 13b):

This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus. [F]or their deeds will follow them.

That even with John's glimpse of the cosmic battle already being won. Even with the Lamb standing on the mountain and his followers there by his side. Even with the guarantee that Babylon has fallen and will only continue to fall. The Spirit of God declares that there is a significant role for his people to play. That those who long to be among the people of God still have a part in the story. Still have a call to patiently endure and faithfully follow Jesus. Still have an ongoing and trajectory-altering invitation to put the words of Jesus into practice, one faithful deed at a time.

And why? Because it says: *their deeds will follow them*. That their deeds will echo in eternity. That as they follow Jesus, their deeds follow them – in reputation and reverberation. All with the power and potential to move God's story closer toward its eventual and eternal conclusion.

Jesus said it this way (Matthew 10:42):

And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded.

Jesus essentially says that even the smallest action toward the least in his kingdom has eternal consequences. Not that he's saying that it's our actions that get us into "heaven", but that even the smallest act of love has the power to move all of us closer to the *reward* of standing in the presence of the Lamb on the foundation of God's everlasting kingdom, just like those who've gone before us as the *firstfruits* promised at the beginning of the chapter.

And that brings us full-circle to the final section of Revelation 14, where we catch a glimpse of eternity's *greatest action*. *The action* that ultimately gives our actions their eternal meaning and significance. Where in verses 14-20 we finally get to the "something more" that John hinted at with the "firstfruits" earlier in the passage.

Summarizing this section, it says (v14-16, 17-19a):

I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like a Son of Man with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the whole earth was harvested.

Then another angel came out and called out, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are fully ripe!" Then the angel swung his sickle upon the earth and gathered the harvest of the earth's vineyard.

What we see at the end of Revelation 14 is an image of Jesus gathering the harvest.

Now, for an agrarian culture the *firstfruits* mentioned earlier were such a significant sign and celebration because of how they signalled something greater to come – the harvest. The most significant event and celebration of the year! *The action* that saved and sustained every other action! *The action* that gave meaning to all the rest of their actions throughout the year! And here, it is Jesus' action that is the "greater thing" being revealed and *the action* that gives eternal significance to the deeds and actions of his followers.

And it's significant that two kinds of *harvests* are described. The first being a *grain* harvest that was normally harvested with a sickle. But the second is a strange addition and parallel, describing a *grape* harvest also being harvested with a sharp sickle (which was not the usual practice). In fact, the description of the grape harvest ends up going further with some strange and symbolic language describing the pressing of "*God's wrath*", "*outside the city*", resulting in an immeasurable "*flow of blood*" in all directions – at face-value, a rather shocking scene. But with a little help from the most thorough commentators on the symbols of Revelation, we come to realize that John is imaginatively describing Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. Where God expressed *wrath* toward evil and injustice, not by inflicting it, but by absorbing it. Where Jesus – who was one with God – was crucified *outside the city*.

Where, on the night before he gave up his life, he held a piece of bread and said: *This is my body broken for you.* And with a cup of wine: *This is my blood poured out for you.*

His body broken like a head of grain. His blood shed like grape-juice from a winepress. And through his sacrifice, initiating a great harvest of salvation reaching as far and as wide and as high as our minds can imagine! As the *action* that guarantees God's salvation, and, the *action* that makes *our actions* matter – by calling us to pick up *our cross* and follow him. Living Lamb-like cross-shaped lives with deeds that echo into eternity.

You see, the reason our actions matter – why John says *our deeds follow us* – is because of the cross, that both ***cleanses our actions and calls us to action.*** *Cleanses* any deeds we wish we hadn't done. And *calls* us to follow the Lamb in cross-shaped love. And while the story of Revelation 14 makes clear that *Babylon* has already fallen, and the *firstfruits* promise God's harvest to come, in the here and now, Jesus says we have a critical role to play because, ***"The harvest is great, but the workers are few."*** (Matthew 9:37)

So, the question is: Are our actions working toward the harvest or falling into the trap of Babylon? Am I seeing everything I do – from the smallest of deeds – as an opportunity to work with God through sacrificial acts of love? Or am I worshipping and pursuing the beasts of my own self-interest and success? Am I trusting that the way of the Lamb ultimately stands firm for eternity? Or am I giving into the lie that empire always wins?

Because Jesus gave his life so that our lives could matter. So that anti-Lamb actions could be *cleansed* and so that everyday deeds could be *called*. Called to follow the Lamb in every deed and action – actions of love that echo toward the eternity of God's great harvest!

And that's what we get to celebrate in communion... The bread and juice that symbolize Jesus' sacrifice and God's harvest... Both our cleansing and our calling...