

## **“Follow the Lamb” (Revelation 14:1–5)**

**July 4, 2021**

**Brian Watson**

What does it mean to be a Christian? What does a Christian’s life look like?

Those are important questions because a great deal is at stake when it comes to Christianity. Christianity teaches that whether one is a Christian or not is the difference between living with God forever in a perfect world or experiencing a terrible, tormented existence apart from God forever in hell. There are people who identify as Christians who would deny that statement, who would suggest that people of other religions or no religion at all could somehow be reconciled to God, but you would be hard pressed to derive such a conclusion from the Bible. So, the question of whether or not you are a Christian, according to the Bible, is important because nothing less than eternity is at stake.

According to the latest research, 2.3 billion people claim to be Christians.<sup>1</sup> That’s approximately 30 percent of the world’s population. It would be nice if that were true. But I can’t help but think that this world would be different if that many people were indeed transformed by God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, born again into new creations who follow Jesus and become more and more like him. I believe that many people who claim to be Christians are not indeed Christians, and I would argue that the Bible makes that claim in different ways.

We live in an age where people are almost obsessed with self-identification. According to some people, what you believe you are is indeed what you are. But that is simply not how reality works. If I were obese, no amount of self-identification as a slender person would make me thin. I can say I have a full head of hair, and if I had enough power, I could make you say the same. But that wouldn’t change the fact that I’m bald. And if I’m not following Jesus, no amount of wishful thinking that I am a Christian would indeed make me a Christian.

So, back to the question: What does it look like to be a Christian? We’ll get something of an answer this morning as we look at part of Revelation 14. I was going to preach Revelation 14:1–13 this morning, but as I looked more at the text, I thought I would focus on the first five verses, and perhaps a few others between verses 6 and 13. I’ll focus more on verses 6–13, as well

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe>.

as verses 14–20, next week. Those verses speak of judgment. This morning, I want to focus on what it means to be saved from judgment, to be reconciled to God.

Let's first read Revelation 14:1–5:

<sup>1</sup> Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.  
<sup>2</sup> And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, <sup>3</sup> and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. <sup>4</sup> It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, <sup>5</sup> and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.<sup>2</sup>

As I re-read and study more about the book of Revelation, this final book of the Bible, I am increasingly convinced that it does not tell a literal, linear story, one that moves from beginning to middle to end. Other books in the Bible, such as 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, or the Gospels and the book of Acts, are written that way. But not Revelation. Instead, it is a series of images that John sees. The images are like little snapshots of spiritual realities, ones that are revealed to John in a certain order but are not intended to tell a chronological story. If we read the book in that way, and if we demand that these images must be interpreted in a woodenly literal way, then we'll miss the message of Revelation and we'll turn the book into something absurd.

I think that is clear in this passage. If we were to take this passage in a woodenly literal way, then those who have been redeemed, spared God's judgment against sin, are 144,000 male virgins who have God's name written on their heads and who stand on Mount Zion in Israel next to a special Lamb. But that's not what this passage is really saying.

John does see the Lamb on Mount Zion, but the Lamb is Jesus, the Son of God who died a sacrificial death to pay for the sins of his people. Throughout the Bible, there is a clear message: human beings have sinned against God. They have rejected him, denied him, rebelled against him, disobeyed him, and failed to love and honor and worship him. This is no small thing. We were made to love, and live for, God. Failing to live for God is like getting signed by

---

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

the Red Sox for millions of dollars and then not only refusing to play for the Red Sox, but then going to play for the Yankees instead, while the Red Sox continue to pay your salary. Or, perhaps instead of playing for another baseball team, you play another sport instead, or perhaps no sport at all. That's a poor analogy, but it makes a point: God has given us life and breath, our DNA, our families, our abilities, and every single moment we have on earth. He continues to sustain our lives. We were created to live for him. Instead, we refuse to play for his team, deciding we can be better coaches, or that other teams would be better suited to us.

This kind of rebellion is destructive, and God cannot leave sin, evil, rebellion, unchecked. He can't let it go on forever. So, he has given us a partial punishment for sin: death. But there is a final judgment against sin, what the Bible calls the second death. Nevertheless, the Bible is clear that sin demands the death penalty, and throughout the Old Testament, animals like lambs were sacrificed in place of sinners. God graciously allowed sinners to transfer their guilt to others, who would die in their place. This was merely symbolic, however, since, as the Bible says, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." (Heb. 10:4). The only one who can truly take away sins is the God-man, the Son of God who became a human being, Jesus, who died in the place of his people when he was crucified almost two thousand years ago. That is why Jesus is called the Lamb. His death was an atoning, sacrificial death. It took nothing less than the death of the Son of God to pay for the sins of his people.

And he is pictured as standing on Mount Zion, the mountain on which Jerusalem stands, where he was crucified. But it seems that this is not intended to be the literal Mount Zion or Jerusalem. This is most likely intended to be what is sometimes called the heavenly Jerusalem, or the New Jerusalem, or simply the City of God. I say that because the apostle Paul says that the literal Jerusalem is enslaved to the old covenant and is likened to Mount Sinai, whereas the "Jerusalem above" is free (Gal. 4:25–26)—free from a slavish obedience to the law, a covenant that promises condemnation for those who disobey. The author of Hebrews makes a similar contrast between Sinai, where God gave Israel his law, and Zion, where Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins. Mount Zion is "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22). The Bible teaches that our hope is not to be found on earth, but it is in God, who dwells in heaven. One day, heaven will come down to earth, and the two will become a new creation.

Another reason I think that this reference to Mount Zion is not intended to be literal is that the City of God is continually contrasted with the City of Man, often called Babylon.

Throughout the Bible, Babylon represents mankind resisting God. Sometimes, the reference is literal: the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and the kingdom known as Babylon, the world's superpower roughly 2,600 years ago were literal places. But throughout the Bible, Babylon takes on a more metaphorical meaning, so that the Rome or the Roman Empire could be called Babylon, as we see in 1 Peter 5:13 or in the book of Revelation. If Babylon is contrasted with Jerusalem, and if Babylon is not a literal geographical reference, then neither is Jerusalem a literal geographical reference.

The point is that John sees Jesus in the heavenly Jerusalem with his people. And these people are depicted as being 144,000 in number. We've already seen this number in Revelation 7. I said of that number that it represents the full number of God's people. 144 is twelve times twelve: the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New Testament (cf. Rev. 21:12–14). 1000 is  $10^3$ ; ten and three are perfect numbers. But often Israel's soldiers were counted in thousands.<sup>3</sup> I suspect that is why they are referred to as those “who have not defiled themselves with women,” or as pure men, since in Israel armies consisted of men. That suggests that the image is meant to be taken this way: Jesus has an army of the redeemed with him. They have Jesus' name, and God the Father's name, written on them. Again, this is not meant to be literal. It is in contrast to those who are marked as belonging to the beast (Rev. 13:16–17; see also Rev. 3:12; 7:3; 22:4). The point is that though Satan and his beasts have their legions of followers, the Lamb has his legions, too.

Revelation tells of a fight between good and evil, God and Satan. And if it's true that here the image is of an army of Christians, fighting alongside Christ, then how do you think this army fights? How do we fight against evil? How do we fight against Satan? Do we arm ourselves with the weapons of this world? Do we stockpile guns and ammo? Do we make sure we have as much wealth and political power as possible, so that we can crush atheists and Muslims and anyone else who is not a Christian? There is always a temptation to use fight as the world fights, to do whatever it takes to get power and wield it like an axe—or a nuclear weapon. But is that what this army does?

Well, let's keep thinking about what we read in Revelation. In verses 2 and 3, we're told of a loud voice that roars from heaven, a voice that sounds like the roaring of many waters.

---

<sup>3</sup> There are several references to thousands of men fighting in Joshua and Judges: Josh. 4:13; 8:3, 12; Judg. 4:6, 10, 14; 8:10; 20:2, 15, 17.

Imagine all the sound produced by Niagara Falls, multiplied and amplified many times over. Now, early in Revelation, we're told that Jesus had this kind of roaring voice (Rev. 1:15). Later in Revelation, in chapter 19, we're told that a great multitude has a voice that sounds like the roaring of many waters and like peals of thunder (Rev. 19:6). It seems that the redeemed have some of the same attributes of Jesus. Their collective voices, used to praise God, echo the voice of Jesus, the one who has always praised God the Father. They are depicted as playing a new song on harps (similar to Rev. 5:8–9). According to Greg Beale, "In the OT the 'new song' was always an expression of praise for God's victory over the enemy, which sometimes included thanksgiving for his work of creation (cf. Pss. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa. 42:10)."<sup>4</sup> So, it seems that this army of the redeemed are praising God for defeating their enemy.

Again, how does this army fight? Well, it seems that they don't fight at all. It is God who defeats their enemy. The true enemies are Satan, sin, and death. And we can't defeat them. But God can, and in the end, he will. God fights our fight for us, and we praise God, giving him all the credit.

So, part of what it means to be a Christian is to praise God. We praise God because of what he has done for us in and through Jesus. The reason the Son of God became man was to make men sons of God. Of course, he makes women daughters of God, too. And he did this by coming to live a perfect life, fulfilling God's purposes for humanity. Only Jesus lived a sinless life. No one else has come even close. Jesus also died an atoning death, receiving the penalty for sin that we deserve. We cannot live perfect lives because we are harmed by the destructive power of sin. We all fail. And we cannot remove our own sin through our best efforts. It is impossible for us to fight that fight, which is why we need God to fight for us.

Being a Christian means recognizing this. Christians realize their complete dependency upon God, their need for salvation that only he can give, and they recognize that Jesus is the world's only Savior. Salvation is available in Christ alone. Christians realize this, and they cling to Christ and praise God for salvation. Part of what it looks like to be a Christian is to be thankful to God for his grace, for the gift of salvation. It is not something we have earned through our obedience, through our good works, through our best efforts to be better people. Salvation is sheer grace, a gift, something not dependent upon us.

---

<sup>4</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 736.

Yet Christians also do their best to follow Jesus and fight against sin. Verse 4 says that the redeemed “have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.” This cannot mean that only virgin men are Christians. And it can’t mean that only virgins are pure. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that sex within the right context, which is marriage, is wrong. Sex is a good gift given by God to be enjoyed in the context of that one-man, one-woman, one-flesh relationship. So, we can’t take this literally. But what does it mean? Last week, I quoted part of the apostle Paul’s words regarding false teachers. And I quoted this verse, 2 Corinthians 11:2: “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.” Paul saw himself as something of a matchmaker, pairing Christians with God—more specifically, betrothing them to Jesus, the Son of God. In this metaphorical relationship, God is the husband, the groom, and God’s people are his wife, the bride. On that great wedding day, when God’s people are presented to God, the bride should be pure. That was Paul’s concern. He is speaking of moral purity.

Part of this purity is avoiding idolatry, the worship of false Gods. Idolatry is often likened to sexual immorality (Rev. 2:14, 20), because idolatry is basically cheating on God. We were made for an exclusive relationship with God, but we run around with other gods. Now, most people don’t find some alternative god and sing its praises, offer sacrifices to it, and have a statue of it in their homes. However, that was something that did happen in the ancient world, and it would be part of life in the Roman Empire. But we do make things other than God more important in our lives. We put our money, entertainment, careers, and, primarily, ourselves, above God. That is idolatry. Part of the battle that we fight is continually removing idols from our lives. When we find that we love something more than we love God, it is time to put that idol to death.

We must not defile ourselves with idols and with sin. Yes, we do not save ourselves by removing evils from our lives. We can only be reconciled to God and forgiven of our sin through grace. Yet that doesn’t mean we are supposed to keep sinning. Sin is destructive, and God does not want us to keep destroying ourselves. Though we are regarded as holy in God’s sight because of the work of Jesus, the true holy one, we must strive for holiness. We are already holy because we are credited with Jesus’ righteousness, because he has taken away our guilt, and because we have been given the Holy Spirit. But the Bible also tells us to continue to become more like Jesus, to become holy and blameless.

Hebrews 12:14 says, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Strive for holiness. Without it, you will not see God. If we keep on sinning just as we did before, we are not truly Christians. Again, this doesn’t mean that we earn salvation. Salvation is a gift. But the evidence that we have received that gift is a determination to live holy lives.

In Philippians 1:9–11, Paul tells Christian to continue to grow so as to be pure. He writes,

<sup>9</sup> And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup> so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Christians are supposed to grow in love, knowledge, the ability to discern what is good and evil, what is of God and what is not, and to live lives less marked by sin and more marked by good works.

Here is another passage, also written by the apostle Paul. This is 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8:

<sup>1</sup> Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. <sup>2</sup> For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup> not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; <sup>6</sup> that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. <sup>7</sup> For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. <sup>8</sup> Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Here, Paul tells Christians God’s will for their lives, which is to become sanctified, or holy. What does that involve? Avoiding sexual immorality, or sex outside of marriage. Controlling one’s body. Now, there’s more to holiness than avoiding sexual sin. But sex is a giant temptation for us all. It’s a trap into which many fall. God knows this. After all, he created sex. It is explosive, and it must be used in the right way, or it will explode our lives and the lives of others.

Sexual immorality and other forms of immorality are highlighted in yet another passage from Paul. This is 1 Corinthians 6:9–11:

<sup>9</sup> Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor

drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

This passage talks about sexual immorality in general and specific terms. It also mentions idolatry. But notice that it also mentions greed, theft, and drunkenness. The idea is that the lives of Christians should not be marked by these sins. Paul says that such were some of these Christians. They *were* those things. But *now*, having become Christians, their lives have changed.

This does not mean that if we're truly Christians, we will never sin again. If that were true, I don't know that there's ever been a Christian. But it means that we will continue to fight against sin, that we will be bothered by it, that we won't take it lightly. Jesus himself said this, in Mark 9:43–48:

<sup>43</sup> And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. <sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. <sup>47</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, <sup>48</sup> 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'

That might be hyperbole, but the main point comes across clearly: Do what you can to fight against sin. If something in your life is leading you to sin, get rid of it. This reminds me of a quote from John Owen, the seventeenth century British theologian. Puritans used to talk about killing, or mortifying, sin. Owen wrote, "Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you."<sup>5</sup> Kill sin or it will kill you.

Now, we can only fight against sin through God's grace. And we can fight against sin because God is at work within his people. That's why one of the marks of a Christian is that fight against sin. If the Holy Spirit dwells within you, you won't be content to remain as you are. You will want to become more like Jesus. That's why in this passage, we're told that the redeemed have no lie in their mouth, for they are blameless. That's likely a reference to Isaiah 53:9, which says of the Messiah that "there was no deceit in his mouth." Jesus never lied. Christians should

---

<sup>5</sup> John Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 6, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburg: T&T Clark), 9.

be like that. Remember that Satan and his beasts deceive. They lie. Christians must reject their lies and they must always tell the truth. Most importantly, we need to tell the truth about God, about our sin, and about salvation in Christ. We must be faithful as Jesus is faithful, and we must become like him as far as we are able. We will never be saviors or gods, so we can't be like him in that regard. But we can try to follow his example in his obedience, his love, and his truth-telling.

Another aspect of being a Christian is following Jesus. We're told the redeemed follow the Lamb wherever he goes. That is something that Jesus said. He said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?" (Mark 8:34–37). Jesus tells us that if we want to be part of his kingdom, we must deny ourselves, which means that we must deny certain sinful desires, particularly the desire to be God. We cannot insist upon our right to this and that before God. We must also be willing to take up our cross, not to pay for our sins, but to suffer, to be persecuted. And we must follow. In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27).

We don't necessarily have to physically move anywhere to follow Jesus. Following Jesus means agreeing with him. We must agree with him about who God is. We must agree with him about what is right and what is wrong. We must agree with him about the problem of our sin and the only salvation available, which is in and through him. We must agree with him about we should live our lives if we are his people. And agreeing with Jesus means agreeing not just with the so-called red-letter words, the words that he is quoted as saying in the Bible. We must also agree with his apostles and prophets, who delivered his message.

In the end, if we want to be right with God, we must agree that he is right and we are not. We must plead for his grace, and we must be willing to let him take over our lives. And we must fear him—be in reverent awe of who he is. Look quickly at Revelation 14:6–7:

<sup>6</sup>Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. <sup>7</sup>And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

Part of the eternal gospel, the good news message of Jesus, is that we must fear God and give him glory. That is the right thing to do, and it is good for us, because that is our purpose. And for those who do this comes great blessing. Look at verse 13:

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: 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!”

Those who are united to Jesus by faith, those who have been transformed by God, those who follow Jesus, and those who strive for holiness enter into eternal rest, a rest from weariness, a rest from depression and loneliness and anxiety and guilt and sin. We all long for that kind of rest, and it can be found only in Christ.

My message to us all is to put our trust in Jesus. We must acknowledge that only he can win the battle we are in, that battle of good and evil, God and Satan, sanctification and sin. Salvation is a gracious gift that we can only receive. But once it is received, it must be put into use. There are two errors that people often make, two errors that lead people to misunderstand the gospel. One is that they think they can earn salvation. You cannot do that. There is no number of good deeds that we could do to erase our sin. Another is to think that grace means we have a blank check, written by God, allowing us to sin as much as we want. Those who understand the cost of salvation and the destructive power of sin wouldn't think that way. We are not called to an endless legalism, constantly worrying about every minor sin and doing all that we can to atone for our misdeeds. But neither are we called to licentiousness, doing whatever we want because, hey, God will forgive us. We are called to trust Jesus for our salvation and follow him.

This message is what the world needs. The world needs to hear that there is forgiveness. Without grace, everyone would be cruel and demanding towards others. But the world also needs to hear that there is a real, objective moral standard. Somethings are right and others are wrong. And we should avoid that which is wrong because it is unhealthy. We need both moral standards and grace. And we should seek to be gracious to others forgiving them their sins against us, while applying moral standards to our lives, seeking to be the best that we can be. But our society gets this backwards: we're ungracious and unforgiving to others, all the while playing the victim and being lax in our personal holiness. Let us try to reverse this trend by striving for personal holiness and by being gracious to others. That is the way of Jesus.