

“The Harvest of the Earth” (Revelation 14:6–20)

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There are some Christians—or, at least, people who identify as Christians—who talk quite a bit about inclusivity today. The good thing about such talk is that they focus on inviting everyone to Jesus. In a sense, Jesus is for everyone. We want to tell everyone that there is good news, an eternal gospel, that there is a way to be made right with God, to be forgiven of all our wrongdoing, and that is through a relationship with Jesus. We are told repeatedly in the Bible that people from many different nations and languages and tribes will be part of God’s kingdom. Of course, the Bible says that to be part of God’s kingdom, one must believe in Jesus and repent of sin. One must believe certain things to be true. And that’s where people who talk a lot about inclusivity go wrong. They want there to be one united people on earth, and they want everyone in that group. To quote an old commercial, they would like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony. That’s a noble idea. However, in order to achieve that worldwide unity, these supposed Christians downplay the importance of beliefs, even believing in Jesus. They want to believe that people from other religions or no religious at all will, in the end, be right with God and live forever in peace and harmony. As much as we all want that, the fact is that the Bible clearly says there will be a division at the end of this age. There will be those who are blessed and those who are cursed, those who have been redeemed by Jesus, and those who will be condemned because they have rejected him.

I always find it ironic that the people who talk about inclusivity exclude people like me, people who believe—rightly, I would argue—that the Bible teaches that the message of Christianity is exclusive. (They would also exclude people like me who believe the Bible teaches certain things about controversial issues regarding sex, gender, marriage, and much more.) Salvation is exclusive because it is found only in Jesus, and one must consciously believe in him to be saved. By preaching inclusivity, these people exclude others. True, universal inclusivity, while a wonderful dream, simply isn’t possible. God will divide humanity into two groups: those who are part of his kingdom and family, and those who are not. The entrance into God’s kingdom is Jesus. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one can come to God the Father except through him (John 14:6).

Today, as we continue our study of the book of Revelation, we will see an image of final judgment. Some will be welcomed into God’s kingdom and blessed. They will find eternal rest. Others will be excluded from God’s kingdom. They will be judged, condemned, tormented, and without rest. In short, they will be cursed. The difference between the two groups is simply that those who find eternal rest worship the Lamb, while those who will be eternally restless worship the beast.

We will read Revelation 14:6–20 today. Let’s start by reading verses 6 and 7:

⁶Then 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. ⁷And 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.”¹

Most of the content of the book of Revelation consists of descriptions of images that John, the author of the book, sees. God presents these images to John, and he writes them down to send to churches. Here, John sees an image of an angel proclaiming “an eternal gospel.” The word “gospel” means “good news.” The eternal gospel is the good news message of Christianity. The apostle Paul says that the core of the gospel is that Jesus died for our sins in accordance with Scripture, that he was buried, and that he was raised from the dead, also in accordance with the Scriptures (see 1 Cor. 15:1–4). Jesus is the Son of God who, while always being divine, also became a human. He lived the perfect life that we don’t live, fulfilling God’s intentions for humanity. And Jesus died for sin because sin—our rebellion against God, our lack of love for him, our disobedience to his commands—is so bad. Sin is so bad that it deserves death (Rom. 6:23). In fact, it deserves eternal death. Jesus took that death penalty away from those who trust in him. And he rose from the grave, showing he had paid that penalty in full, that he has power over sin and death, and that all who are united to him by faith will also rise from the dead. They, like Jesus, will receive glorified, indestructible, immortal bodies.

This gospel message is eternal because it is always true. That is opposed to the “good news” message of the Roman Empire. There is an ancient inscription found in southwest Turkey—roughly the area of the churches that John was writing to—that says that the birthday of Augustus, a prominent Roman emperor, was the beginning of gospels, because Augustus brought

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

peace to the Roman Empire. He made wars to cease, and that was good news.² But that gospel isn't eternal, because the Roman Empire was not able to stop all wars forever. The Roman Empire, like all other empires, would fall.

People today proclaim various gospels of health and wealth, of liberation from this and that, but these messages are not eternal gospels. They cannot claim truthfully that health, money, and pursuing our desires will lead to eternal wellness. These messages can't bring eternal rest. These false gospels are supposed to be relevant, but they will soon become irrelevant. As one person has said, "He who marries the spirit of the age soon becomes a widower." And, as Simone Weil has said, "To be always relevant, you have to say things which are eternal."³

The gospel of Christianity is eternal, and eternally relevant, and it is to be preached to all humanity. Everyone is encouraged—urged, even—to fear God and glorify him. That is why we exist. In the end, all will fear God, but not everyone will live with him forever.

Verse 7 indicates that the hour of judgment has come. What we see in this passage is one of many pictures of an end time judgment.

Verse 8 says this:

Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality."

Babylon represents the kingdom of man, the system of sinful humankind opposed to God. The statement that Babylon is fallen comes from Isaiah 21:9, which referred to a literal kingdom of Babylon. That verse says that God shattered Babylon's idols. Here, the point is that all human idols will be shattered, and sinful humanity will fall. "Babylon" made the nations "drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality" (see Jer. 51:7–8). I think this is a reference to idolatry in general, which could very well include sexual immorality. Sexual sin is often linked to idolatry. But idolatry can be referred to as sexual immorality because idolatry is cheating on God, whom we are supposed to worship exclusively.

Babylon makes people—people who aren't Christians—worship idols. Babylon leads people to worship the beast, which we talked about two and three weeks ago. Those who worship

² See John Dickson, *A Doubter's Guide to the Bible: Inside History's Bestseller for Believers and Skeptics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 133.

³ The first quotation is attributed to Dean Inge. Both quotations are found in D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, Fifteenth Anniversary Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 476, who cites Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 63.

the beast will not only drink the wine of sexual immorality. They will also drink the wine of God's wrath. Let's read verses 9–11:

⁹ And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰ he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."

Those who are not redeemed by God worship idols, including the beast, which represents the idol of a sinful, oppressive, totalitarian government. That government could be like Rome, which encouraged its citizens to worship the emperors and other false gods. It could be like the government of communist China, of North Korea, and the former Soviet Union. People who worship the state and its gods are marked—not literally, but figuratively—as belonging to those states. And those idolaters will drink the wine of God's wrath.

The image of the cup of wrath is found throughout the Old Testament (Job. 21:20; Pss. 60:3; 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 21–23; 63:6; Jer. 25:15–16; Obad. 16). The idea is that those who drink the poisonous wine of idolatry will drink the poisonous wine of God's wrath. These people have brought condemnation upon themselves because they have chosen that which destroys them. To turn away from the true God is no small matter, since we were made by him and for him. Turning away from the source of light and life leads to darkness and death. Those who drink the cup of idolatry poison God's creation. They corrupt what God had initially made good. When God created the world, we are told that he found it to be good, and he blessed both animals and human beings (see Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; Gen. 1:22, 28). But when sin entered into the world, threatening God's creation, God cursed the serpent, who is Satan, and creation (Gen. 3:14, 17). Those who turn away from God bring curses upon their own heads. They will drink the cup of condemnation and wrath, and they will be tormented forever.

The image of smoke rising forever is taken from Isaiah 34:10. It also fits with the end of the book of Revelation, when we're told that hell is like a lake of fire that burns forever. We are told that Satan and his beasts will be thrown into the lake of fire, and they will be tormented forever (Rev. 20:10). We are also told that all who are not redeemed by Jesus will be thrown into that same lake, which suggests that they also will be tormented forever (Rev. 20:15; see also

Rev. 22:14–15, which also suggests that those who are condemned will continue to exist). It is important to observe that the Bible indicates that those who are condemned will suffer torment forever, because it is increasingly popular to say that those who are condemned are simply annihilated, or destroyed. But the Bible doesn't clearly teach that. On balance, the verses dealing with ultimate condemnation suggest that hell is eternal, that those who are there will continue to be tormented.⁴

This is a frightening notion. We should feel the full weight of it. It is well captured by James Joyce in his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which a preacher says this:

A holy saint (one of our own fathers I believe it was) was once vouchsafed a vision of hell. It seemed to him that he stood in the midst of a great hall, dark and silent save for the ticking of a great clock. The ticking went on unceasingly; and it seemed to this saint that the sound of the ticking was the ceaseless repetition of the words: ever, never; ever, never. Ever to be in hell, never to be in heaven; ever to be shut off from the presence of God, never to enjoy the beatific vision; ever to be eaten with flames, gnawed by vermin, goaded with burning spikes, never to be free from those pains; ever to have the conscience upbraid one, the memory enrage, the mind filled with darkness and despair, never to escape; ever to curse and revile the foul demons who gloat fiendishly over the misery of their dupes, never to behold the shining raiment of the blessed spirits; ever to cry out of the abyss of fire to God for an instant, a single instant, of respite from such awful agony, never to receive, even for an instant, God's pardon; ever to suffer, never to enjoy; ever to be damned, never to be saved; ever, never; ever, never. O, what a dreadful punishment! An eternity of endless agony, of endless bodily and spiritual torment, without one ray of hope, without one moment of cessation, of agony limitless in intensity, of torment infinitely varied, of torture that sustains eternally that which it eternally devours, of anguish that everlastingly preys upon the spirit while it racks the flesh, an eternity, every instant of which is itself an eternity of woe. Such is the terrible punishment decreed for those who die in mortal sin by an almighty and a just God.⁵

That is frightening. And we need to feel the weight of hell, to make sure that we turn to Christ and truly live as his people. We also need to feel the weight of hell so that we tell others about Jesus. We do not want anyone to be consigned to eternal torment.

⁴ Even the language of “day or night,” sometimes written “day and night,” points to an eternal situation. That is because this phrase is used in Isa. 60:11 to describe the new Jerusalem, which endures forever.

⁵ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 143–44. I was made aware of this passage by James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 279.

The fact that hell is such a weighty reality should lead us to continue to fight against idolatry and compromise, and to cling to Christ. Christians will face a great deal of pressure to compromise their faith. They will face some kind of persecution, even if it is very mild. The fact that Babylon—in whatever shape it may take—pressures us to worship idols and that idolatry leads to hell means that being a Christian is hard. Christians need to endure in their trust in Jesus. That is why we read this in verse 12:

¹² Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

Notice that saints, which is a word that indicates that all Christians are made holy, are described as “those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.” Being a Christian means obeying God’s commands. We don’t obey to become Christians. We cannot earn salvation through obedience. But once we have received the gift of salvation, we must obey. And we must continue to exercise our faith in Jesus. True Christians follow Jesus actively throughout their lives.

True Christians are also promised a great reward: eternal rest. Look at verse 13:

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!”

Jesus promised to give rest to all who labor and are weary, to those who would follow him, to those who would come under his yoke, under his reign and rule, and learn from him (Matt. 11:28–30). This blessing comes to all who are united to Christ. They will one day be free from world weariness, from sadness and sorrow, from anxiety and pain. They will be free from a world of decay and death. Not all will experience this; only those who trust in Jesus will.

Those who trust in Jesus will be harvested, so to speak. There will one day be a final division of those who belong to Jesus, and those who will be condemned by him. That harvest is pictured in verses 14–20. First, there is a harvest of grain, a harvest of Christians, who will be brought into the barn, metaphorically speaking, of God’s kingdom. Verses 14–16 say this:

¹⁴ Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand.

¹⁵ And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, “Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for

the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.”¹⁶ So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.

Jesus himself used this language of harvest and reaping in the Gospels. When he sent his disciples to preach, he told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:37–38). He also said, “Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest” (John 4:35). In this agricultural metaphor, those who preach the gospel sow the seed of the word of God. In some cases, that seed will grow and bear fruit, or it will grow into grain. Then, the time will come to reap that grain, to harvest what has grown. The idea is that there are people who will respond to the gospel, they will grow into fruit-bearing Christians, and they will be brought into God’s kingdom. Jesus taught that at the final judgment, there will be a separation of wheat, God’s people, and weeds, those who reject God. He taught this in the parable of the wheat and weeds (Matt. 13:24–30). In explaining the meaning of this parable, Jesus said,

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers,⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (Matt. 13:37–43).

In that parable, he likens wheat to his people, just as we see in Revelation 14. But in that parable, he calls those who reject him, those who belong to the devil, weeds. In Revelation 14, they are likened to grapes. Let’s read verses 17–20:

¹⁷ Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸ And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, “Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” ¹⁹ So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. ²⁰ And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse’s bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

The image of the sickle and grapes comes from Joel 3:13, which says,

Put in the sickle,

for the harvest is ripe.
Go in, tread,
for the winepress is full.
The vats overflow,
for their evil is great.

Those who drank the wine of idolatry will drink the wine of God's wrath. And, changing the metaphor a bit, those who reject God will become wine. They will be crushed. Revelation 19:15 says that when Jesus returns, "He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty." That is what is happening here.

These grapes, objects of God's wrath, are crushed outside the city, which surely means outside the new Jerusalem, the new creation. The result is that blood flowed for 1,600 stadia, pooling to as high as a horse's bridle, several feet off the ground. The measurement of 1,600 stadia is about 184 miles, roughly the length of Palestine, measured from the city of Tyre to the border of Egypt. Whether that is what John was thinking of or not, the point is that a lot of people will be condemned, to the extent that if you could take all their blood, it would spread wide and high.

That is admittedly graphic and gory and just awful to think about. It depicts the awfulness of God's judgment. I do not mean that God's judgment is awful in the sense that it is wrong. No, God is just. He has every right to punish sin and sinners, because they are rebelling against the very reason why they exist. Failing to trust Jesus is in the end failing to honor God. It is failing to love God. Even those who seem indifferent to God, or apathetic to God, or who seem okay with the idea of a generic God but who don't really follow Jesus, are not loving the true God. And the fact is that all of us sin, and all of us fail to live life on God's terms. Our selfishness, pride, lust, envy, gluttony, greed, laziness, and many other sins lead to a corrupt world. In the end, God will purge the world of all evil. And that means purging the world of all who refuse to come to Jesus.

So, God is just to condemn. He must do so in order to bring about justice, to set the world aright. One might wonder why condemnation is eternal, why those who reject Jesus aren't annihilated. I suppose God allows people to go their own way, rather than destroying them. People say to God, "I don't want you." And God says, "Fine, go ahead and live without me." As C. S. Lewis put it in *The Great Divorce*: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'

All that are in Hell choose it.”⁶ Perhaps it is better to let people go their own way than destroy them forever.

Additionally, it seems that people who go to hell don’t stop sinning. They continue to hate God and reject his commandments. People in hell do not feel sorry for their sins. It is not as though they think, “This is torment. I deserve this because of my sin. Oh, I wish I had never sinned against God.” No, they continue to rage against God, and God is right to keep them out of his new creation, in which there is no sin, rather than let them come into the place he has prepared for his saints. If they were to come into that new creation, they would corrupt it, just as we have corrupted the first creation through our sin. God will remove all sin from his people because part of being a Christian means hating sin, hating one’s own sin, and wishing to never sin again. God will grant that wish to those who turn to Jesus. All the saints will live in a perfect world, and God will keep it pure by preventing anyone who would corrupt the new creation. As Revelation 22:15 says, “Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.”

Still, some people may claim that hell isn’t fair or just.⁷ For anyone who thinks that way, I say this: In a sense, there is something about that passage that isn’t fair. It’s not fair that God would rescue any sinner from condemnation. It’s not fair that God would forgive people who are guilty of sin. I say that because the price of redemption, the cost of forgiveness, is unimaginably

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 75.

⁷ At some point in the sermon, I addressed a common objection: “But I’m not a bad person. I don’t deserve hell!” I made reference to something that Tim Keller has written:

Imagine a widow has a son she raises and puts through good schools and a good university at great sacrifice to herself, for she is a woman of very slender means. And as she’s raising him she says, “Son, I want you to live a good life. I want you to always tell the truth, always work hard, and care for the poor.” And after the young man graduates from college he goes off into his career and life—and never speaks to his mother or spends time with her. Oh, he may send her a card on her birthday, but he never phones or visits. What if you asked him about his relationship with his mother, and he responded: “No, I don’t have anything to do with her personally. But I always tell the truth, work hard, and care for the poor. I’ve lived a good life—that’s all that matters, isn’t it?”

I doubt you would be satisfied with that answer. It is not enough for the man to merely live a moral life as his mother desired without having any kind of relationship with her. His behavior is condemnable because in fact she gave him all he has. More than just a moral life, he owes her his love and loyalty.

And if there is a God, you owe him literally everything. If there is a God, you owe him far more than a morally decent life. He deserves to be at the center of your life. Even if you are a good person but you are not letting God be God to you, you are . . . guilty of sin. . . . You are being your own savior and lord.

This passage is from Timothy Keller, *Encounters with Jesus: Unexpected Answers to Life’s Biggest Questions* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 36–37.

high. And God, who is entirely innocent, bore that cost himself. More specifically, Jesus, the Son of God, bore that cost. When Jesus died on the cross, he was treated as the worst of criminals, though he never did anything wrong. He was treated as the scum of the earth. Even worse, when he was nailed to that cross, enduring unimaginable physical pain and suffering, he bore God's wrath against sin. He experienced hell on earth, which cannot be quantified. It went far beyond physical pain. Jesus endured psychological, emotional, and spiritual torment that we can't begin to imagine.

I say that because Jesus referred to his death as drinking the cup (Mark 10:38; 14:36). What cup was that? It was the cup of God's wrath. Jesus willingly drained that cup for sinners so that they would never taste God's wrath. That wine of God's wrath was not diluted or watered down. Jesus took it full strength. God's wrath remains on those who reject Jesus, but Jesus drank it for anyone who would humbly come to him, confess their sin, and cling to him.

We are simply in no position to say that God is unfair. In a sense, it's unfair that the Son of God would experience God's wrath. But he did, and he did so willingly, so that God could justly punish sin and righteously justify sinners.

I want to close by saying this: judgment day is coming, and hell is real. For those who are not yet Christians, I ask you to think about the possibility of this terrible fate. You might not believe it is real and that it is really awaiting you. Are you sure of that? Are you sure that when you take your final breath you will not begin to experience this eternal torment? If you have any doubt, I urge you to learn all you can about Jesus, to read the Bible cover to cover, to turn from your sins and to the Savior. I would love to talk with you about this. Feel free to reach out to me, or to any other Christian in this church, for that matter.

For those who claim to be Christians, do everything you can to be sure that you are following Jesus. True Christians follow him and obey him. As the apostle Peter has written, "be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election" (2 Pet. 1:10).

Here is another word to those who are Christians: Think about the reality of hell. Think about how all the people you love who are not yet Christians will go there if they end this life in rebellion against God. Meditate on that terrible reality. And then plead with your loved ones. Tell them to put their faith in Jesus before it is too late.