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REVELATION 14: 14 – 20

WHEN THE HARVEST IS RIPE, GOD WRAPS UP OUR HISTORY

In the United States, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” is a popular patriotic song, written at the beginning of the American Civil War. The first lines go like this: *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.* The lyrics refer to Revelation 14:19–20. The poet links the American Civil War with God’s judgment of the wicked in this passage.

About 80 years later the words of this song gave John Steinbeck the title of what is perhaps the most famous American novel of the 20th century: “The Grapes of Wrath”. This book, published in 1939, describes the tragic fate of a poor family of tenant farmers during the Great Depression in the 1930’s. Terrible drought and famine drive them from Oklahoma to California, searching for jobs and food to survive the future.

But in California they continue to suffer abuse, injustice, and poverty. The rich farmers would rather destroy their abundant crops to keep the prices high, than feeding the hungry. The title of Steinbeck’s novel symbolizes its theme, namely, the oppressive circumstances of the poor, who suffer abuse and injustice, will result in terrible wrath.

The question for us is: the grapes that are trampled in the great winepress of God's wrath, as mentioned in Rev. 14, do they refer to political evils, as suggested in "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", or to social evils, as in Steinbeck's book?

Of course, we can rightly say that those things are all part of the evil in this world. At the same time, we have to realize that the text goes much deeper; this contrast between good and evil runs deep.

In the first part of Rev. 14 we saw that God is going to resolve the conflict between good and evil, the conflict between the dragon and the Lamb, between Satan and Christ, between Satan's followers and those who worship the Lamb.

In the last part of this chapter Christ shows us the results of this in John's vision of a twofold harvest, described in the v.14-16 and 17-20.

THE GRAIN-HARVEST OF HIS SALVATION

Before we get into more details, the first question we need to answer is this: does the vision that John is seeing in our text, show us a two-fold harvest – one that symbolizes the gathering of all the believers at the end of times, and another one as an image of the gathering and punishment of all the wicked at the same time?

When you read through the passage it seems obvious. But some argue that it is really about one harvest, a harvest of severe judgment. They base this on Joel 3:13. There we read: *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.* This seems to support this idea of one harvest, in two images. He does give the impression that he only talks about God judging the wicked, although v.16 of Joel 3 gives a different picture. There he also refers to the LORD as *a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.*

When connected with Joel 3:13, John's vision could be pictured as one judgment in two parallel images or metaphors that refer to the same event. The purpose of such a structure would be to emphasize the seriousness of God's wrath.

However, there is strong evidence that in this vision we see images of two different harvests. You could say that the one is a positive metaphor and the other one is a negative metaphor.

The most significant difference is that the first harvest is one action, one stage – which is harvesting or gathering, probably of grain. It does not say anything about threshing or winnowing to separate the wheat from the chaff. Winnowing, in the Bible, is an image of judgment. Think of Matthew 3:12. But harvesting grain, on the other hand, is used as a positive picture of gathering God's people into glory.

In contrast, the second harvest, the grape-harvest, has two actions, two stages. After being harvested, the grapes are being trampled in the winepress of God's wrath. The latter is a picture of judgment and severe punishment.

This makes it worthwhile to have a closer look at what John is seeing. It starts with an amazing vision of a beautiful white cloud. And the surprising thing is, there is someone sitting on it. He sees *one like a son of man*, a human being.

In the Bible, a cloud is often a manifestation of God's glorious presence. Think of the cloud that led Israel when they left Egypt (Exodus 13), or the cloud that filled the tabernacle and the temple (Exodus 40; 1 Kings 8). The colour white reflects God's heavenly light, his purity and holiness.

But there is more. The person John is seeing wears *a golden crown*. That is a symbol of his majesty, his royal authority. It tells us that this person rules with the power and glory of a king. Altogether it is a triumphant view. The one on this cloud in the sky is exalted above all human powers in this world. In him the victorious glory of Almighty God himself is coming to our world.

Who is this? There are enough reasons to believe that *the one seated on this cloud* is no one less than our Lord Jesus Christ in his royal majesty, our exalted Saviour.

Some have questioned that. "He must be someone else, a lesser figure," they say. "Perhaps an angel." After all, it says in the next verse (15) that *another angel came*. And on top of that, it would be odd (as happens in v.15) that an angel would come to command or instruct the glorified Jesus Christ, would it not?

And yet, there can be no doubt that the expression *one like a son of man* refers to Jesus in his heavenly glory. It is this same title that comes with the description of his splendour in Revelation 1:12–16. And all this goes back to Daniel 7:13–14, where the prophet Daniel sees *one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven, who was given authority, glory, sovereign power, and an everlasting kingdom*. This is a prophecy about Christ.

Another notion in the New Testament confirms this. We know how the Bible tells us that at his return Jesus will come on the clouds of heaven. This will be totally overwhelming. His glorious appearance will be seen everywhere. Everyone will recognize him as King. And *at the name of Jesus every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth* (Philippians 2:10, 11). And here he is. Despite the rebellious violence against him in this world – here he is, powerful and victorious!

The question is: What are the implications of Jesus' victory for you and me, for all of us and for all the people in this world, for those who believe in him and worship him **and** for those who resist him?

John's vision shows us the image of Christ in his role as "reaper", ready to harvest the crops. As such that sounds neutral. But the vision also makes clear that this 'reaper's role is not neutral, because the reaper is, at the same time, the judge, and his harvest is one of people. And in his role as 'reaper', Christ is going to reap people for salvation **and** he is going to reap people for judgment.

Today, we are being told that all human choices and all the various directions people choose in their lives are equally valid. But the Bible does not support that. The question that matters is: which differences and distinctions between people are relevant to separate them when Judge Jesus comes for the harvest?

We tend to separate people along the lines of their cultures, histories, backgrounds, traditions, ethnicity, political views, etc. But those things turn out to be irrelevant when the reaper comes. He has different standards. The people to be harvested are either, what the Bible calls, righteous people or wicked people. And the difference between these two is one of grace. Do you live by God's grace, through faith in Jesus, or do you refuse to repent from sin and turn to Jesus?

To be sure, on the day that God is going to wrap up our history, all human beings, all of us, without any exception, will face the same Judge. The two different images in John's vision are strongly connected by that same one Judge in the person of Jesus Christ. But the results will be different, radically different. The results will be each other's very opposite.

In the first part of his vision, the positive metaphor of the grain-harvest, the harvest of the righteous, John sees the 'one like a son of man', sitting on his cloud, with a *sharp sickle in his hand*. This is a piece of farming equipment. In the ancient agricultural world, it was used for harvesting grain. The word "sickle" is used six times in these verses. It is a verbal thread that ties both parts together, to remind us that these two harvests, although not identical, are strongly connected.

And so we see the royal Judge, equipped and prepared to go. The reaper is ready for the harvest. But he does not do anything! What is he waiting for?

He has to wait for the right time. He must wait for God's time. Indeed, right now the exalted Christ is still waiting for the signal that the Holy and Almighty God is ready to wrap up the history of our world. This is the tension of the time we live in. Christ is ready. Today already he is eagerly waiting for the signal that it is time. Are we? Are you just as eagerly waiting for this moment as your Saviour is?

In John's vision, in the view from above, it does not take long. The apostle sees *another angel coming*. That is not "another" one "like a son of man" on the cloud. That would imply that this "son of man" was actually an angel. No, it is another angel, in addition to the three mentioned earlier in this chapter (Rev. 14:6, 8, 9).

This one is coming *out of the temple*. He comes directly from before the holy throne in the sanctuary in heaven. He comes with a message straight from God Almighty, a message for the glorified Christ, who is waiting with his sickle in his hand. And what he has to say he calls out with a loud voice. He shouts the commands of the holy God, clearly, and for everyone to hear.

Such shouting is not disrespectful towards Christ. This angel is just a messenger. All he does is follow the instructions God has given him, to pass on

the heavenly command: *Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.*

This is such an incredibly powerful moment. This is the moment Jesus has been waiting for. Now the time he has been looking forward to, has come!

In Matthew 24 Jesus is having this conversation with his disciples about signs that would indicate that the end of time is near or has come. And then he says this in v.36: *Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.* That is remarkable. Did you realize that? Even Jesus himself does not know. He can only wait. Just as you and I can only wait.

Only God the Father knows, the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. He who began everything, he alone decides when the time has come to wrap up our history, the history of his creation. John's vision shows us what is coming when the grain-harvest is ripe. The sign is given and the glorious 'son of man' swings his sickle over the earth.

When we take Joel 3:13a and read through Matt. 13:36–43, where Jesus explains the Parable of the Weeds (*cf.* Matt. 12:24-30), we get a deeper understanding of the metaphor of the grain-harvest. It refers back to what was said in Rev. 14: 4, about the 144,000 to be offered as first-fruits to God and to the Lamb. This imagery has to do with the harvest celebrations in the Old Testament.

Jesus will be collecting all God's people from out of this world. Wherever you are in the journey of your life on earth, when Christ gets his Father's message that the harvest is ripe, he will come to collect you. And together with all God's children, all of them of all ages and from all over the world, he will bring you to your final destination. And no one will be left behind.

Do we have any idea when the harvest will be ready? Yes, we do. When the last believer in this world has turned to God and has embraced Jesus as his or her Saviour, then *the hour to reap has come.*

This puts us on the spot. It makes it urgent for the church to remain busy with making disciples, followers of Jesus, of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20). All over the world mission and evangelism remain top priorities for the church until the very end.

No, that does not mean that we know the date. But instead of looking around, shaking our head about all the bad stuff that is going on and wondering why Jesus is waiting, we better get ready by doing faithfully what the Lord calls us to do, as long as we have the opportunity.

But when the command is given by the Father, the moment Jesus has been waiting for arrives. And immediately he swings into action. *So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.* Yes, indeed, Jesus is ready to go at it, any time!

And how great, how wonderful it will be to see the exciting results when the harvest is brought in, the harvest of his own church gathering work; the completion of his grand project, as it has been unfolding throughout the centuries. We will see the fruit of mission work, evangelism, and church-planting; we will see the fruit of the weekly preaching, of prayer, pastoral work, catechism-classes, youth-work, Bible-study; we will see the fruit of Christ's church gathering work in all its glory!

What a marvellous moment this is going to be for all who believe in Jesus Christ. From everywhere and from all times we will get together for the grand reunion. The dead will rise; the living will change, and we will all see each other on that great and glorious day.

I am sure you would all like to be there, so we better be ready for it. For when it is time, it all comes to its final closure. God is wrapping up our history.

THE GRAPE-HARVEST OF HIS WRATH

The second part of the vision in this passage comes under the same theme as the first part. It is the theme of the coming harvest when we will all face the same Royal Judge. And when I say "all", I mean that every human being will come to know him, whether he or she believes in him or not.

Of course, when John describes his twofold vision, he pictures the one harvest following after the other. That is the only way to describe it. But it is good to realize that both harvests actually happen simultaneously, at the same time.

However, as we've seen, the two metaphors are not identical. Here we find the image of a grape-harvest. And just as the grain-harvest turned out to be a positive metaphor, an encouraging picture, so we will learn that the grape-harvest is a negative metaphor, a frightening picture.

In other words, just as Jesus' second coming as victorious King and righteous Judge will bring salvation to God's people, so it will bring judgment and eternal punishment for the wicked.

John's vision reinforces the message that resounds throughout this book. Whoever does not heed God's warnings, whoever does not repent, whoever does not have life and hope in Jesus Christ, he can expect God's judgment.

This time the one who reaps the harvest is not Christ. He will have another role. This harvest is gathered in by an angel (v.17). He too has with him *a sharp sickle* as a harvest tool, to carry out God's wrath, God's judgement over the wicked.

Just as the image of the grain-harvest refers back to v.4, the 144,000 as the firstfruits to be presented to God and the Lamb, so the image of the ripe grapes refers back to v.10, the wine of God's fury, poured into the cup of God's wrath.

John sees this angel coming out of the temple, directly from the presence of God, and thus personally authorized and qualified by the Almighty Ruler of the universe himself. The first one with a sickle, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, does not need this authorization. All he needs is the signal when it is time.

The angel with the sickle will need the same signal. He does not know either when it is the exact right time. He also must wait for further instructions to learn when the grape-harvest is ripe, ready to be gathered in.

Here again is the tension of the time we live in. The harvest of God's wrath is coming. But today there is still time to repent. Today is still the day of grace. However, no one knows when it will be over. This makes the message of the church even more urgent: repent and believe in Jesus Christ before it is too late!

But here again, in John's vision, with his view from above, things move quickly. A third angel appears, another messenger instructed by God's command to pass on the message that it is time for the grape-harvest. Here is another loud voice, calling out with a powerful sound: *Put in your sickle and gather the clusters [of grapes] from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.*

About this angel we learn that he *has authority over the fire* and that he comes *from the altar*. What does that tell us? In Revelation we find 'the altar' also in Rev. 6: 9, 10 and in Rev. 8:3–5. The image refers to the Old Testament altar of incense, the golden altar before the throne of God. From this altar the smoke of incense would rise up as a symbol of the prayers of God's people, ascending to God himself.

Do you remember what happened in Rev. 8:3–5? There an angel stood at the altar to offer incense, with the prayer of all the saints, before God. Then he filled his censer with fire from the altar and threw it all on the earth. God's response to this offering was his judgment in the first six trumpet blasts. That is in Rev. 8:6 and Rev. 9.

Perhaps the angel here in Rev. 14:18 is the same, with authority over that fire and coming from that altar. Here is the picture: when this angel gives the signal that it is time for the grape-harvest, then, in harvesting and crushing the grapes of wrath, the Holy God hears the prayers of the believers.

Always remember that God's wrath for the wicked is not just an unreasonable outburst of furious anger. No, God's wrath is a measured response triggered by his perfect justice. Therefore, God's judgement is his final answer to the prayers of his people, the cries for justice.

When he is given the green light, *the angel swung his sickle across the earth, gathered the grape harvest and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.*

He collects the entire multitude of those driven by evil, the followers of the beast, the worshippers of the dragon, all who refuse to repent, but resist and hate God and reject his love in Jesus Christ.

Usually you would not use the same tool for harvesting grain and harvesting tender fruit, like grapes. Grapes should be handled with more care. But not here! This grape-harvest gets a rough treatment with all the "throwing and

trampling”. And just as the grapes are crushed, so the wicked will experience severe punishment.

What we read in the second part of Joel 3:13, and also in a chapter like Isaiah 63, gives us the clues to understand the devastating seriousness of what is going to happen when the grapes of wrath are ripe. Indeed, when the time has come this frightening harvest will be inevitable. In Rev. 20 we will hear more about the Last Judgment itself. Here we are shown the horrible results of this Judgment.

And do we have any idea when those grapes will be ready? Yes, we do! Now again, we do not have a date. But when all the evil and wickedness, all the injustice and corruption in this world has reached its horrible peak, when things cannot get worse, then the fullness of God’s wrath and judgment comes. Then this whole evil vine will be cut down and uprooted.

The angel with the sickle collects it all and throws everything in the winepress of God’s wrath. God wraps up the history of this world, so thoroughly damaged by sin. Enough is enough.

When John then talks about these grapes being, trodden, trampled, crushed in the great winepress of God’s wrath, the metaphor becomes very thin, so to speak. The graphic and gory language conveys the seriousness of God’s punishment that awaits those who refuse to repent and believe in the Saviour Jesus.

Now here is a curious question. Who is doing the trampling? It is remarkable, but it does not say. Later on, in Rev. 19, we find out that it is Jesus Christ. There John describes in v.11–21 the vision of the victorious Christ as the Rider on the white horse. Of him it says (in 19:15) that *he treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty*. The One who saves God’s creation, is also the One who will cleanse it. The Redeemer is also the Judge.

Then the picture changes dramatically. You would expect wine or grape-juice to flow out of the winepress. But what John is seeing is blood. An enormous amount of blood! The graphic imagery reflects the language of Isaiah 63. The harvest turns into a terrible carnage, a horrendous bloodbath, a huge lake of blood wherever you look, as far as you can see, so deep that horses can swim in it.

The distance of sixteen-hundred stadia, or about three hundred kilometres, portrays how terrifying the scene is. But do not overlook the symbolism of 'four by four' and 'ten by ten.' With four as the number of the earth and ten the number of completeness, the message is clear that this is a worldwide bloody massacre.

The barbaric bloodshed is shocking for our modern sensitivities. There is no way we can ignore or soften the disturbing violence of this vivid picture. Jesus Christ wants to shock us into reality. Do we see the seriousness of our choices? The intoxicating influence of the secular culture of Babylon is too dangerous to allow it to go on as if it does not matter. Spiritual sleepiness threatens our spiritual well-being. Wake up!

Whatever people tell you, whatever ideas may be promoted today, do not believe that following Jesus Christ can go together with accommodating the power of Satan. That is not a valid choice. Revelation 14 keeps sharpening the choice we all must make. You cannot bear the name of God, the seal of the Lamb **and** the mark of the beast.

But there is one encouraging detail in this last verse. Trampling the grapes of God's wrath will happen *outside the city*. This is the holy city, the city of God, the New Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God's people, saved by grace through the blood of Christ. God's children will remain unharmed in the Judgment.

Yes, the Holy God will establish his eternal Kingdom. But as his plans unfold in the time in which we live, he keeps issuing his warning signals, his urgent calls to repent, because it is not going to be a smooth and peaceful transition.

It will be realized through worldwide bloodshed of unprecedented magnitude.

Take refuge in God's love. Seek your security in Jesus' blood, and you will be safe! When God wraps up our history, the final victory of our exalted Saviour is not in doubt.

Jesus will reign from shore to shore for ever and ever.

as Paul uses this expression in 1 Corinthians 15:20, where he calls Christ *the firstfruits of all the redeemed*? Would this imply that in the end all of mankind will be saved? Earlier (see Rev.7) we identified the 144,000 as all the redeemed. What is then here the meaning of the term ‘firstfruits’? Compare James 1:18

3. What does it tell you about the world we live in, when Revelation emphasizes the contrast between “those who follow the beast” (13:3) and “those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4)?
4. Could or should Rev. 14:7 be used as a theme for an evangelism or outreach campaign? Why or why not?

Chapter 22 – Revelation 14:14-20

1. The vision in this passage shows a separating harvest: the grain harvest leads to eternal joy, whereas the grape harvest leads to eternal wrath. What is the connection with Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:31-46? This triggers difficult questions. What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ as Saviour, to live faithfully and obediently as he calls us to do? See also James 1:27. Explain the term ‘social gospel’.
2. In Matthew 22:37-39 Jesus indicates that at the heart of Christian living is: loving God with all your heart, soul and mind, and next to this, loving your neighbour as yourself. What about all the people who do not believe in God and do not follow Jesus as Saviour, but who do live according to good Christian values (helping the poor and hungry, caring for refugees, homeless, victims of disasters, etc.). They may not love God, but they do love their neighbour. Can we emphasize the 2nd of these two commandments [love your neighbour] at the cost of the 1st one [love God]?
3. What is the task of the church? Changing the circumstances in people’s lives or giving people hope for the future? If you think it’s both, should one have priority over the other? If so, which one and why? How does Rev. 14:14-20 help you to answer this question?
4. How do we see God’s patience, God’s long-suffering in Rev. 14:14-20? Compare 2 Peter 3.