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Revelation #28

**Great and Amazing are the Deeds of God!
Revelation 14:14-20; 15:1-8**

Last week we immersed ourselves in what is undeniably one of the most *emotionally challenging* passages in all the Bible. The portrayal in Revelation 14:9-11 of eternal punishment in hell is terrifying and sobering. Today we come to a passage that is only slightly less foreboding.

There is no doubt whatsoever that what we read in this final paragraph of Revelation 14 is a symbolic portrayal of the final judgment that will come when Jesus Christ returns to this earth at the end of history. People don't want to hear that. They prefer to think that life will simply continue on as it currently exists and that when it comes time for them to die they will go to a place in the sky called "heaven" and be reunited with their loved ones and friends, regardless of whether or not they have ever trusted and treasured Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. To suggest that judgment is coming when Christ does, to suggest that not everyone who is "religious" or "spiritual" or "good" or "law-abiding" will enjoy eternal fellowship with God, is politically incorrect to the highest degree.

But the words of this passage are unmistakable and unavoidable. In it we find two harvests that will take place at the return of Christ: one of the saved unto eternal life, and the other of the lost unto eternal condemnation.

The Harvest of the Saved (vv. 14-16)

Who is this person or being who is "like a son of man"? Some have argued that this is simply another angel, in light of the fact that in the previous paragraph we saw three angels bringing a message of judgment against unbelieving nations in the earth. However, the likelihood is that this is an allusion to Daniel 7:13 which all acknowledge is a portrayal of God the Son, and therefore it is the risen and exalted Son of God, Jesus Christ who is in view in v. 14.

I can understand why some conclude this is yet another angel. As I said, we've just witnessed the appearance of three angels in Revelation 14:6-13. You can also see that the one "like a son of man" in v. 14 and the angel in v. 17 both have a "sharp sickle." Perhaps the strongest evidence that this being in v. 14 is an angel is the fact that the angel in v. 15 issues a command to him to "put in your sickle and reap." It does seem odd that an angel would be portrayed as giving a command to the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ. However, be it noted that if the "command" is one that the angel received from the Father in heaven (note reference to his coming from the heavenly "temple"; this is typical of angelic responsibility), the idea of his then passing this on to Jesus is not objectionable.

So I am inclined to think that the one “like a son of man” is in fact Jesus Christ.

As we’ll see in a moment, there is no debate about the meaning of vv. 17-20. Everyone agrees that those verses describe the final judgment of unbelievers only. But what about vv. 15-16?

Those who argue that vv. 15-16 refer to judgment only appeal to the fact that both vv. 15-16 and vv. 17-20 are a clear allusion to Joel 3:13, a passage that deals only with divine judgment:

“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” (Joel 3:13).

Also, the “sickle” is more normally viewed as *a negative instrument of judgment*, designed to inflict harm, not to provide help. And then there is the phrase “the *hour* to reap has come” (v. 15). This sounds similar to “the *hour* of his judgment has come” in v. 7, the latter clearly referring to the final judgment. And of course, the image of a “harvest” is common in the Bible for divine judgment (see Isa. 17:5; 18:4-5; 24:13; Jer. 51:33; Hosea 6:11; Joel 3:13; Matt. 13:24-30,36-43; Mark 4:29).

But I’m not convinced that vv. 15-16 describe only, or even primarily, judgment. I think what we read here is a portrayal of the harvest of those who are saved. Here is why. First, you may remember that the 144,000 are described as “first fruits” (Rev. 14:4) in the sense that they are an *initial redemptive ingathering* that anticipates or serves as a pledge of a final redemptive harvest. Vv. 15-16 describe the latter. Second, it is no less the case that the image of a harvest (especially “reaping”) can be used in a *positive* sense as a metaphor of the gathering of God’s elect (see Luke 10:2; Matt. 13:30,43; John 4:35-38). Third, there is no reference in vv. 15-16 to the metaphors of threshing and winnowing (common images of judgment). Therefore, *I’m inclined to believe that vv. 14-16 describe the glorious ingathering of God’s elect from the four corners of the earth*. The “reaping” of the earth (v. 16) is John’s poetic way of describing how Jesus at his second coming will differentiate between believers and unbelievers, separating them and taking into his presence all who have trusted him as Lord and Savior.

The Harvest of the Condemned (vv. 17-20)

In biblical times a winepress would be constructed of either brick or some form of rock. The grapes would be placed in an upper trough where they would be trampled upon by workers. The juice from the grapes would then flow down a channel into a lower trough. This practice of treading upon a cluster of grapes in a wine press is without exception *a vivid metaphor of divine judgment in the Bible*. In the description of the second coming of Christ in Revelation 19:15 it says that “he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God,” and all agree that this is a portrayal of final judgment. Verses 17-20 also echo what we saw last week in Revelation 14:9-10 where being compelled to drink wine is a metaphor of divine punishment. The OT background is probably Isaiah 63:1-6.

Thus we are reading here of the final judgment that will come upon all who have rejected Jesus. Just as one would take grapes and tread upon them to produce wine, God will tread in wrath and judgment upon an unbelieving, Christ-hating world.

But let's slow down and look more closely at v. 20.

First, the wine press was trodden "outside the city" (20a), most likely a reference to the holy city, i.e., the new Jerusalem (15x in Revelation). In Revelation 20:8-9 we read of unbelieving enemies of the saints being judged outside the "beloved city" (see also 21:8 in conjunction with 21:27 and 22:14-15). It may be that this judgment of unbelievers constitutes what might be regarded as "poetic justice," given the fact that Jesus was himself executed "outside of Jerusalem" (Matt. 27:33; Mark 15:22; Luke 23:33; cf. Heb. 13:12-13).

Second, blood rising "as high as a horse's bridle" is *stock, figurative language in prophetic and apocalyptic literature designed to emphasize wartime slaughter of exceptional proportions and the unqualified nature of the judgment in view*. It is most often used of the last battle in history in which sinners will destroy each other on an unprecedented scale. Thus it should not be taken in some physically literal way, as if one could actually quantify the amount of blood that will be spilt! Craig Keener (p. 378, notes 39-41), David Aune (2:848), and especially Richard Bauckham (*Climax of Prophecy*, 40-48) provide extensive listing of ancient sources that document this unique verbal form.

Third, the distance of "**1,600 stadia**" (which was equivalent to about 184 miles) probably bears some symbolic importance. The number 4 in Revelation is symbolic of the four corners of the earth, thus pointing to the global scope of this judgment. When 4 is squared one gets 16. 16 is then multiplied by the number 100 which stands for the completeness of judgment. Others have argued that the number 40 is itself symbolic of judgment, as when Israel was compelled to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. 1,600 is 40 squared. In other words, *vv. 17-20 are a highly symbolic, intensely graphic way of describing the desolation and destruction that awaits the unbelieving world at the time of Christ's return*. I know this isn't popular and one typically won't increase church attendance by speaking on it, but it is true. And because it is true we should be increasingly energized with passion to proclaim to all, "Repent and believe the gospel!"

The Wrath of God

Many would prefer that we only speak of God's love and grace. *But apart from the reality of divine wrath neither love nor grace makes much sense.*

Some less-than-evangelical theologians and pastors have argued that the doctrine or concept of *wrath* is beneath the dignity of God. The late C. H. Dodd, for example, spoke for many when he said that the notion of divine wrath is *archaic* and that the biblical terminology refers to no more

than “an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.” In other words, for these folks, divine wrath is an impersonal force operative in a moral universe, not a personal attribute or disposition in the character of God. Wrath may well be ordained and controlled by God, but is clearly no part of him, as are love, mercy, kindness, etc.

Opposition to the concept of divine wrath is often due to a misunderstanding of what it is. Wrath is not the loss of self-control or the irrational and capricious outburst of anger. Divine wrath is not to be thought of as a celestial bad temper or God lashing out at those who “rub him the wrong way.” Divine wrath is ***righteous antagonism toward all that is unholy. It is the revulsion of God's character to that which is a violation of God's will.***

I know this may strike you as odd, but there is a very real sense in which one may speak of ***divine wrath*** as a function of ***divine love***. ***God's wrath is an expression of his love for holiness and truth and justice.*** It is because God passionately loves purity and peace and perfection that he reacts angrily toward anything and anyone who defiles them. J. I. Packer explains:

"Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not. But it is precisely this adverse reaction to evil, which is a necessary part of moral perfection, that the Bible has in view when it speaks of God's wrath" (*Knowing God*, 136-37).

Leon Morris agrees:

"Then, too, unless we give a real content to the wrath of God, unless we hold that men really deserve to have God visit upon them the painful consequences of their wrongdoing, we empty God's forgiveness of its meaning. For if there is no ill desert, God ought to overlook sin. We can think of forgiveness as something real only when we hold that sin has betrayed us into a situation where we deserve to have God inflict upon us the most serious consequences, and that is upon such a situation that God's grace supervenes. When the logic of the situation demands that He should take action against the sinner, and He yet takes action for him, then and then alone can we speak of grace. But there is no room for grace if there is no suggestion of dire consequences merited by sin" (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 185).

Wrath isn't something reserved exclusively for the future. It is even now, presently, being revealed and expressed by God. We read in Romans 1:18 that God's wrath ***is being*** revealed (present tense). Paul probably has in mind the disease and disasters of earthly life. It is also true that God's wrath is revealed in the content of Romans 1:24-32 where God is portrayed as giving over sinners to a deeper and more intense cultivation of the sinful behavior that they have chosen for themselves. In other words, God's wrath is seen even today in his abandonment of people to their chosen way of sin and its consequences.

When we envision God as filled with wrath against sin and evil we should also understand this as ***an expression of his justice***. When we speak about the ***justice*** of God, we have in mind the idea that God always acts in perfect conformity and harmony with his own character. Justice, therefore, is God acting and speaking in conformity with who he is. To say that God is ***just*** is to say that he acts and speaks consistently with whatever his righteous nature requires.

When we speak of divine wrath as one facet of divine justice our primary concern is with what has been called the ***retributive justice*** of God, or that which God's nature requires him to require of his creatures. ***Retributive justice is that in virtue of which God gives to each of us that which is our due***. It is that in virtue of which God treats us according to our deserts. Retributive justice is thus somewhat synonymous with ***punishment***. This is a ***necessary*** expression of God's reaction to sin and evil.

Retributive justice is not something which God may or may not exercise, as is the case with mercy, love, and grace. Retributive justice, i.e., punishment for sin, is a matter of ***debt***. It is something from which God cannot refrain doing lest he violate the rectitude and righteousness of his nature and will. ***Sin must be punished***. It is a serious misunderstanding of Christianity and the nature of forgiveness to say that believers are those whose guilt is rescinded and whose sins are not punished. Our guilt and sin were fully imputed to our substitute, Jesus, who suffered the retributive justice in our stead.

An excellent illustration of this principle is found in Psalm 103:10. Retributive justice is that in God's nature which requires him to deal with us according to our sins and reward us according to our iniquities. But in Psalm 103:10 we are told that God ***“does NOT deal with us according to our sins, NOR repay us according to our iniquities!”*** Indeed, according to v. 12, we are told that ***“as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”***

Does this mean, then, that God has simply ignored the righteous requirements of his nature, that he has dismissed or set aside the dictates of divine justice? Certainly not (see Romans 3:21-26). All sin is punished, either in the person of the sinner or in the person of his/her substitute. ***God's retributive justice was satisfied for us in the person of Christ, who endured the full measure of punishment which the justice and righteousness of God required***. Thus, the reason we can confidently declare that God has not dealt with us according to our sins is because he has dealt with ***Jesus*** according to our sins. He will not repay us according to our iniquities because he has repaid ***Jesus*** for them, by punishing him, for them, in our place.

And don't let anyone tell you that this is an example of cosmic child abuse. What a ***horribly blasphemous*** way of describing the splendor and beauty and joy of substitutionary atonement! Jesus, because of his love for us, ***voluntarily*** and ***willingly*** gave himself in our place on the cross. He wasn't compelled against his will or forced to do something contrary to his desires. Jesus himself said in John 10 – ***“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again”*** (John 10:17-18a). As Paul said,

“the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and *gave himself* for me” (Gal. 2:20b).

The reason we can read Revelation 14:17-20 and not tremble in fear is because the cup of the wine of the wrath of God has been drunk in our place by Jesus, our substitute.

The Seven Angels with the Seven Bowls of Wrath (v. 1)

Whereas it may initially seem strange that John introduces the seven bowl judgments in 15:1, only then to change subjects in 15:2-4, returning again to the bowls in 15:5-8, we have seen it before. In Revelation 8:1-2 the seven trumpets are introduced only to be followed by the parenthetical transition in 8:3-5, after which the trumpets are then described in detail (8:6ff.).

This “*sign*” John now sees in heaven is the third that he has mentioned, the first two being that of the pregnant woman in 12:1ff. and the great red dragon in 12:3ff.

These seven “plagues” or bowl judgments are said to be “the last” (*eschatos*; from which we derive our word “eschatology”, the study of “last things”). Futurist interpreters of Revelation, who see the trumpets as chronologically subsequent to the seals and the bowls as chronologically subsequent to the trumpets, take this to mean that the bowl judgments are the concluding events in history, clustered, as it were, just prior to the second coming of Jesus.

More likely is the suggestion that the bowls are “the last” in a formal series of visions. In other words, the vision of the bowl judgments occurred “last” *in the order of visions* presented to John. Thus John is saying, in effect, “the *vision* I had of the seven bowls is the *last* such vision in a series that began with the seals.” Others suggest that the bowl judgments are “last” in that whereas the trumpets primarily *warned* unbelievers of impending wrath, still holding forth the possibility of repentance, the bowls mark the end of any opportunity to be saved.

Note also that in the bowls, says John, “the wrath of God is finished” (v. 1a). In other words, the seven bowl judgments round out and complete the portrayal of divine wrath that began with the seven seal judgments. The full portrait of God’s wrath will have been painted, so to speak, when the vision of the seven bowls is finished.

Or it could be that we should translate it this way: “in them [i.e., the seven bowls] was filled up the wrath of God.” If so, it would be similar to the statement in 15:7 where we read of “seven golden bowls *full of* the wrath of God” and again in 21:9, “seven bowls *full of* the seven last plagues.” In these latter two texts the imagery is of bowls being filled, metaphorically speaking, with the “liquid” of divine judgment. Thus the meaning of the metaphor in 15:1 would be “that the seven bowls are ‘last’ in that they portray the full-orbed wrath of God in a more intense manner than any of the previous woe visions” (Beale, 788).

Also, it can't be the case that the wrath of God is altogether finished, as if there is no more wrath to come, because we read of God's wrath yet again in Revelation 20:10-15 and we know that God's wrath will continue to be poured out and experienced by unbelievers in hell.

The Song of Moses (vv. 2-4)

This intervening paragraph beginning with v. 2 looks back to the theme of final judgment in 14:14-20 and portrays the consummated defeat of the beast which the victorious and vindicated saints now celebrate in song. They "conquered the beast" and Satan himself, as 12:11, tells us, "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" and by loving Jesus and treasuring him more than their own earthly lives. They are described as holding harps and standing on "a sea of glass mingled with fire" (v. 2a).

Given the "new/second exodus" motif in this chapter, this "sea" probably alludes to the Red Sea through which the Israelites were delivered. Others have seen it as identical with the "sea of glass like crystal" (4:6) which stands before the throne in heaven. It may also be that the "sea" here connotes cosmic evil and the chaotic powers of the dragon resident within it, over which the saints have now emerged victorious.

The victorious saints now sing in praise of God for defeating the beast on their behalf. They sing "the song of Moses" and "the song of the Lamb." Are these two different songs, or one and the same? There's no way to be certain.

Given the background for this in Exodus, perhaps we are to understand Moses as the source or author of a song he and the Israelites sang about God, in praise for deliverance at the Red Sea during the time of the exodus. ***But the Lamb of God has secured for his people an even greater exodus, one that delivers not simply from physical slavery out of Egypt but from spiritual slavery out of sin.*** The song is thus about the Lamb. He is the content and the focus and the principal theme of their singing!

The lyrics that follow in vv. 3-4 do not appear to be drawn from the song of Moses in Exodus 15, but rather come from a variety of OT texts. However, the *themes* in 15:3-4 most assuredly do derive from the song in Exodus 15. As for the lyrics here in vv. 3-4:

"Great and amazing are your deeds" (see Psalm 111:2-4).

All God's works are stunning. There is nothing bland or boring about what God does. All his deeds are the sort that amaze and shock us because they exceed anything that a human being might produce. They are awe-inspiring. None of his deeds are computer generated facsimiles of reality. They ***are*** reality! The psalmist declared something similar: "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered: the Lord is gracious and merciful" (Psalm 111:2-4).

“O Lord God the Almighty” is found repeatedly in the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

“Just and true are your ways” echoes Deut. 32:4. It would seem that this phrase parallels the first, “showing that God’s sovereign acts are not demonstrations of raw power but moral expressions of his just character” (Beale, 795).

We may not immediately recognize the justice in all God does, but we can trust that he never violates what is morally proper. His judgments against an unbelieving world are both true and just. No one is treated unfairly. We find almost identical language in Revelation 16:7 – “And I heard the altar saying, ‘Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!’” (see also Rev. 19:2). And clearly this is said with regard to the final judgment poured out against those who oppose God and his kingdom (see 16:5-6).

I know there is much that God either does or permits that is confusing to you. You wonder why he strikes down a godly man in his youth and allows the wicked to live a hundred years. You wonder, as I do, why he tolerates one earthly tyrant who persecutes the Church and at the same time brings another crashing down in humiliation and shame. But one day we will see all God’s deeds and we will marvel and declare that everything he has ever done was both just and true!

In particular, the saints are singing about the punishment of God’s (and their) enemies, not only in terms of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments which they endure but also the everlasting torment inflicted upon them as described in 14:9-20.

“O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name?” This echoes Jeremiah 10:7.

If the answer to this question is, “No one,” i.e., *everyone will fear and glorify God’s name*, does this imply universalism? No. See Philippians 2:8-11. Even unbelievers will be compelled to acknowledge that God is to be feared and is deserving of all glory and honor and praise.

“For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (all comes from Psalm 86:8-10 and Psalm 98:2).

Again, those among the nations who do not respond voluntarily in saving faith will be divinely and justly compelled to acknowledge this truth. Others take a more positive approach, seeing in this text (v. 4) a reference to the conversion of the nations as they behold the vindication of God’s people and the righteousness of God’s ways.

Seven Golden Bowls (vv. 5-8)

Verses 5-8 are clearly an introduction to the seven bowls of divine wrath that we will read about in chapter 16. We should probably read this as, “the sanctuary *which is* the tent of witness.” This is the heavenly counterpart to the tabernacle in which God manifested his presence during Israel’s wandering in the wilderness. The “witness” or “testimony” here is a reference both to the 10 commandments which Moses placed in the ark of the tabernacle (Exod. 16:34; 25:21; 31:18; 32:15) and the “testimony of Jesus” (12:17) who is the fulfillment of the OT law.

The OT background to the concept of “seven plagues” is probably Leviticus 26 where four times it is said that God will judge Israel “seven times” if she is unfaithful (vv. 18,21,24,28). Here, too, in Revelation we have four sets of seven judgments (seals, trumpets, thunders, bowls).

The verbal similarity between “the seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God” here in 15:7 and the “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” in 5:8, together with 8:3-5, suggests that the saints’ prayers for vindication in 6:9-11 are now being fully answered. The point is that God’s judgments on an unbelieving world come in response to the intercessory prayers of his people. See especially Revelation 6:9-11.

Smoke in the temple is a familiar biblical theme (see Exod. 40:34-35; 2 Chron. 5:13; Isa. 6:1; cf. 1 Kings 8:10-11). Here it is a tangible token or sign of God’s glory and power as revealed in the activity of judgment.

But no one can enter the heavenly sanctuary or temple until the bowl judgments are completed. Why? Perhaps God is temporarily unapproachable because his presence is at this time revealed only in judgment and wrath. Others suggest that it is too late for any angelic or human mediator to present prayers of intercession for God to have mercy on the world. Or it may simply be that, as in Exodus 19:9-16 at Sinai, such a powerful manifestation of divine glory and strength is more than either humanity or the angelic community can bear.

Conclusion

I have but one question for you in closing. ***Is God’s grace still amazing?*** After hearing in Revelation 14 of the justice of God’s judgment and wrath against a sinful world, are you not shocked and overwhelmed by the reality of his saving grace and mercy, given that you and I only deserve judgment and condemnation? If grace has ceased to be anything less than amazing, it can only be due to your failure to properly grasp the justice of God’s wrath. So let’s revisit, as we conclude, the comments of Leon Morris . . .