

The Great Separation

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 January 2025

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 0 0] from the book of Revelation, chapter 14, beginning at verse 1, and that can be found on page 1243 of the church Bibles. So that's 1243, Revelation chapter 14. And before I read, I'm just going to pray that we would really take this word to heart.

Amen.

So that's Revelation chapter 14, beginning at verse 1. Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000, who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps, and they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders.

No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they remained virgins.

[1 : 5 0] They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among mankind and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths.

They are blameless. Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth, to every nation, tribe, language, and people.

He said in a loud voice, Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.

A second angel followed and said, Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice, If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they too will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath.

[3 : 0 9] They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise forever and ever.

There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name.

This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven say, Write this, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

Yes, says the Spirit, they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them. I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like a son of man, with a crown of gold on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand.

Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the clouds, Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.

[4 : 30] So he who was seated on the clouds swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested. Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle.

Still another angel who had charge of the fire came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe.

The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes, and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horse's bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign. Seven angels with the seven last plagues, last because with them God's wrath is completed.

And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire, and standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image, and over the number of its name.

[5 : 51] They held harps given them by God, and sang the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb. Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty.

Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy.

All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. Thanks be to God for his word. Great.

Thanks so much, Jack, for reading that for us. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful. Do please keep the Bible open at Revelation 14 and 15, where Jack was reading for us there.

And he did pray, and we prayed together. But I'm just going to pray again. Let's just pray. Just those words that we heard last week, repeated again and again in Revelation, whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[7 : 05] We thank you, Heavenly Father, for the gift of Revelation, this uncovering of things that are not seen by us. And we ask that you will give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts that respond rightly to your word to us.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, these are big topics. This is a very heavy subject, isn't it? Thinking about the end times at this point in the book. And so I'm happy to take a couple of questions at the end.

I'll just invite people to raise their hands and ask a question if you'd like to do that. Or if you're someone who thinks, well, I've got questions but I don't want to ask in front of everybody, then do please find me afterwards or another member of the ministry team, the staff team, or your small group leader to keep talking about these things.

But when we looked at this Bible passage as a staff team this week, I was introduced to a new word, which is the word horizonlessness. It was new for me, horizonlessness. And Dr. Aditi Naroka, who is a stress doctor, an expert in stress and public health, who says that the large majority of us are now living in chronic stress, says that one major cause is a sense of horizonlessness.

It's that because of the way during the pandemic, we were used to the goalposts constantly moving. So you've got this sense of, oh, things will be done by the summer.

[8 : 33] Things will be done by Christmas at least. Things will be sorted by next week. And that kept moving away. We lost our confidence in what's to come in the future and our ability to sort of look to the horizon and be confident of what's going to happen.

And so coming out, we struggle to live our lives today in confidence and strength because we need, as humans, to be able to look forward to what's coming with a degree of certainty.

And lots of us have uncertainty in our own lives about what job will we do, where will we live. And lots of us have uncertainty about the world. What on earth is Donald Trump going to say this week?

That kind of thing. And revelation here is about uncovering. It's uncovering spiritual realities now that we can't see and realities about the future.

So tonight, God shows us something that, if you like, is to go on our horizon. Something we maybe wouldn't be able to see without God revealing it to us, but it is coming and we can fix it on our horizon and build our lives now in light of it coming.

[9 : 47] Reorder ourselves with confidence. We're picking up at this point in Revelation where we left off in the series last year. So we did a bit of a fast forward. Two weeks ago, chapter one.

Last week, chapters two and three, where all that liby-outy bit was so that now we can just get into where we left off at chapter 14. And the application for tonight's Bible passage was in verse 12, if you have a look there.

Verse 12, this calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus.

In other words, Christian, don't give up. Keep straining forward because this is coming. Our first point then, the judgment of God is declared and decisive.

It's declared from verses 6 to 13 by three angels. And from the first one, we learn that this judgment that's coming from God is inescapable. It's for the whole of humanity in verse 6.

[10 : 50] Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth, to every nation, tribe, language, and people.

Now, we often, as Christians, use the word gospel. It's a kind of jargon word in the Bible for the news about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. It's momentous good news.

And the word gospel just means momentous news. And that news here is a particular angle on it. The eternal gospel here is, verse 7, turn back to God and worship him.

Verse 7, fear God and give him glory because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water. So you see there, the directive is, turn back to God and worship him because he made everything, including you and me, and he's going to judge everyone.

So it's inescapable. And it's inevitable. Verse 8, the second angel announces, fallen, fallen, is Babylon the great. We're going to meet Babylon in the coming chapters as well in the weeks to come.

[12 : 04] And Babylon in Revelation is picture language for the world, all human achievement and power, away from God.

So the term comes from the Babylonian Empire, which was a historic empire, but it becomes this term for any human endeavor that is away from God.

It looks confident, it looks permanent and secure, and God says, it's going to come down. It's going to come crashing down. And then we learn from the third angel the reason why God's judgment is coming.

If you look at verse 9, a third angel followed them and said in a loud voice, if anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they too will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath.

Now that beast is a character we've already met in the previous chapter of Revelation, and it's a picture of Satan's work in the world, the evil one, putting things in the world that we put our hope in instead of God.

[13 : 15] And what follows then are these images of horror about what that judgment, that experience of the judgment of God will be like. For anyone who won't listen to these warnings, language of torment, of burning sulfur, of punishment that goes on forever.

And these are horrible images, and as ever in Revelation, our key to making sense of them is the Old Testament. They're not just to be dwelt on in isolation or with medieval art and pictures.

We're to look at what does the Old Testament have to say about these things. So for example, the picture there of sulfur is a reference back to when God acted in history to bring his judgment down on a wicked city, the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, where horrendous evil was going on in those cities, and God judged them and he brought sulfur down from the sky.

And so that is being used here as an image of God's final judgment coming. So why will the judgment fall?

Who is it for? Well, ultimately, it's about who you worship. Worship. That's the key question. We all worship something in the sense that we all choose to build our lives on something and love and serve something because we think it will give us what we really need, what the Bible says only God can give us.

[14 : 43] Now in chapter 13, verse 16, if your eyes just scan up to verse 16 of the previous chapter, it talked about Satan's work in the world as this beast marking everybody.

So everyone who worships something other than God is given this mark in the world. And so in that sense, you could think of sin here as a bit like identity.

Sin is about really what you're choosing to live for. Is it something in the world rather than God? Well, then you get this one mark. If you've chosen to define yourself and build your life on something other than God.

And then if you look at chapter 14, verse 1, we meet another group of people and they have a different identity. Their identity is they belong to Jesus. Chapter 14, verse 1.

John says, Then I looked and there before me was the Lamb, so there's Jesus, standing on Mount Zion. So he's in heaven, in the temple, the heavenly temple, the presence of God.

[15 : 46] And with him, 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads.

So in verse 9 then, judgment is announced to fall on everyone who's chosen the other mark, the mark of the beast, instead of being marked by the Lamb's name. Which I, I don't know what you think about that, but I think that's a bit surprising because there's a kind of school RE version of understanding of Christianity that says, oh well, when God judges the world, if your kind of good works outweigh your bad works, you'll go to heaven.

And if your bad works outweigh your good works, then you'll go to the other place. But God says here that the dividing line is actually about who you worship. If you worship the Lamb, if that's the fundamental direction of your life, if you follow him, you belong to him, you trust him, he promises he will keep you safe.

No matter how much of a mess you're making of that. If you worship anything else, however good that thing is, however good that makes you in the things that it makes you do because you're living for it, ultimately, you've turned it into a beastly thing because you've made it a God thing instead of a good thing.

And that offends God. Even when we do good things because of our false worship, God is offended by that because we're doing them for the wrong reasons. We're not doing them for God's glory.

[17 : 19] We're doing them for other things we live for. And so the three angels here are announcing with a message, look what's coming. It's on the horizon and see that if you choose to live away from Jesus, when that day comes, you will be on the wrong side of history.

Be sure of that. If you worship something other than Jesus, God says, you will drink the wine of his fury. And this is really hard, isn't it?

I know it's really hard. But it will be a great day of great separation for our world. And we find that difficult, I think, because when you look at the world today, we're all mixed together.

And you can be working alongside and living alongside some people who are Christians and some people who are not Christians. And a lot of the time, there might not seem to be that much difference between them.

Maybe there should be slightly more than there is, but often there doesn't seem to be that much difference. And maybe if you look at the world today and certain parts of the world, if there's one thing that marks out Christians, it's that they're the ones getting a really awful time for being Christians.

[18 : 30] They're being persecuted and they're being afflicted for saying, I'm with Jesus. And God says in Revelation, but on the horizon, there is this day after which our futures will be overwhelmingly different.

Overwhelmingly different. Just compare verse 11b with verse 13. So verse 11b is for those who have the other mark. He says, there will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image.

Then verse 13, then I heard the voice from heaven say, write this, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

Yes, says the Spirit. They will rest from their labor for their deeds will follow them. So the Christian writer, Tim Keller, who a lot of us have read books by him and he died not so long ago and his family when he died said they wished they'd had more time with him.

He got cancer, it was aggressive, they wished that he'd lived longer but he said this, he said, I'd wanted more time but I'm thankful for all the people who've prayed for me, I'm thankful for my family who love me, I'm thankful for the time God has given me but I am ready to see Jesus.

[19 : 50] I cannot wait to see Jesus send me home. On Friday I was out in the street, no it must have been Thursday because on Friday we were all at home, on Thursday I was out in the street here and I bumped into Craig whose mother Moira lived across the road there and she used to come to St Silas and just under two years ago she died and she became a Christian here about eight years ago and so I'm talking to Craig about his grief, haven't seen him for a while, it was his mother who died and I'm able to say to Craig with every confidence your mum is enjoying peace now, she is at rest now because she followed the lamb, she followed the lamb and he has taken her to be with him and she is safe.

If you keep going with him that is your future just over the horizon but there'll be a great separation. That's our first point, the judgment of God is declared and decisive and now John who had this revelation he sees the judgment that's been announced, he sees it happen.

Again he gives us image after image, that's the character of this writing, he wants to overload our senses and help us imagine what is indescribable but the Old Testament is our key.

So our second point, the judgment of God brings a victory for justice. We get two harvests, a grain harvest and that is the rescued people of God being taken by God to safety and then a grape harvest and that is judgment falling on those who wouldn't repent, who wouldn't turn to God.

And we meet the man behind it all in verse 14. John says, I looked and there before me was a white cloud and seated on the cloud was one like a son of man with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand.

[21 : 49] Well we know who this is, this is Jesus. It's the Jesus of Daniel chapter 7. The prophet Daniel saw him being given all authority for all time and the sickle here is a farming instrument that you use to reap in the harvest and I thought it was a scythe.

It's not a scythe if you've got images of the Grim Reaper in your head with this huge sort of metal blade that you like swish through wheat and indiscriminately cut it down.

So a sickle is a smaller handheld instrument and the farmer crouches down with it and he or she takes a handful of wheat and then they cut it at the root so that they're left holding it and the reason they use a sickle is it allows them to be discerning so that they don't miss any fruitful wheat as they're harvesting.

It just ends up in their hand as they go and they can miss out the weeds and pull out the wheat and that's the picture here of the son of man Jesus gathering his people so verse 16 he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth and the earth was harvested and it fits with the picture Jesus gives us of the work that he's doing in the world today of building his assembly gathering the church is a work of the message about Jesus being made known and if people respond rightly to that it's like a seed being sown and landing and producing wheat and Jesus talks about the harvest being plentiful and he's gathering in and that's a kind of representative foretaste of when Jesus looks over the world and everyone who's lived over all time and he gathers in the wheat those who've responded rightly to him and then comes a second harvest and it's for the horror of judgment for the wicked in verse 17 another angel comes out of the throne room of heaven with a sharp sickle and he is instructed to gather in clusters of grapes so verse 19 the angel swung his sickle on the earth gathered its grapes and threw them into the great wine press of God's wrath they were trampled in the wine press outside the city and blood flowed out of the press rising as high as the horse's bridles for a distance of 1600 stadia which could be 4 squared times 10 squared it's saying probably the four corners of the world a huge a really huge number and I know this is hard it's hard for us all of us who have close friends and close relatives who as things stand from what we know of their response to Jesus they are heading for this harvest the grape harvest and not the wheat harvest and that is really tough for us and there comes a point where we have to think do we trust the good character of God that he will do the right thing such that on that last day we will not be left thinking this was wrong of

God to do this rather he is doing this to vindicate his goodness you know when we're asking how could a loving God do this kind of judgment the Bible wants us to face the reality that our world is absolutely desperate for justice this week we've had in the news the trial of the terrorist in Southport who stabbed girls and women at that dance party and has ruined lives and taken lives and people were crying out to see justice in fact one of my friends who is a criminal law judge who's a Christian says how he finds it curious that when he talks to people and says that he is a judge in criminal courts they often want to tell him they think sentences are too lenient and there's not enough justice and when he tells them that he's a Christian they want to tell him that they're offended that God's going to judge the world and we get similar cries don't we about the grooming scandals that have gone on in Britain in places like Rochdale where teenage girls have experienced degrading horrific exploitation and they were deliberately targeted by men who knew they were vulnerable and there are stories in my newspaper that I know that

[26 : 35] I can't read I just see the headline and think oh that's going to be about the killing fields of Ukraine and Russia or Sudan I can't read that I can't have that in my head and we have no hope and no consolation unless we hear news like this that God is there and he sees it and he's angry and he will judge it with fury not because he's not good but because he is good this is the response of pure goodness to human depravity there's a writer Miroslav Wolf who's a kind of public intellectual he's based at Yale and he was raised in Croatia where he experienced first hand the atrocities that took place in the Balkans his own brother was killed when he was five years old by a soldier and he had to experience his Christian parents learning what it would mean to forgive the soldier and he says this he says if God was not angry at injustice and prepared to judge the world he would not be worthy of our worship and he's spoken about how when you're in communities like that like the the Balkans or parts the other parts of the world today we can think of where there is that kind of injustice goes on and atrocity what you end up with is a community stuck in a spiral of hatred where what gets passed down generation into generation is they did this to us we are entitled to vengeance against them so people get dehumanized and the hatred goes on but if you believe that a day of reckoning is coming by a good

God who will put things right it empowers you to entrust all of that wrong to him as the one who will judge justly and that enables you not to retaliate so Miroslav says this he says it takes the quiet of a suburban home to believe that human non-violence fits with God not judging in a scorched land soaked with the blood of the innocent that idea will invariably die along with many other captivities of the liberal mind so you see what he's saying from a safe and secure home in Scotland we find pictures like this one in Revelation very hard to swallow but when your lived experience is atrocity is evil in the refugee camps of northern Nigeria or in the lived experience of the people who were arriving in Europe on migrant boats it's God's promise of justice that gives you the strength to move on and not to need vengeance yourself and the picture of

Jesus here executing the judgment of God with this image of the grapes of wrath and blood flowing out from the winepress comes straight from an Old Testament prophecy the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 63 as God's people were recovering from awful things done to them by the nations around them Isaiah saw a man coming back from the enemy nations and it was Jesus he asks who is this coming from Edom from Bosborough with his garment stained crimson who is this robed in splendor striding forward in the greatness of his strength and he hears Jesus say it is I proclaiming victory mighty to save and Jesus in that passage in Isaiah 63 speaks of his own outrage that no one has acted before him he says I looked but there was no one to help

I was appalled that no one gave support so my own arm achieved salvation for me and my own wrath sustained me and the response of God's people in Isaiah 63 is to praise God for his kindness and his compassion because when God judges the world it will be an expression of the compassion he feels for every victim and here John sees that Isaiah prophecy fulfilled on the day of Christ he's saying lift your eyes to the horizon this is the good news for our world that's coming all of this to motivate us remember chapter 14 verse 12 so don't give up on Jesus if you're a persecuted Christian if you're weary of it of being given a hard time for being a Christian don't give up look ahead this is what he's going to do if you're becoming as we saw last week if you're becoming too tolerant a Christian open to false teaching of whatever nature that's not rooted in the Bible

God says don't drift don't drift from God's word stay on track this is on the horizon or if you're just growing sleepy as a Christian self sufficient forgetting your love for Jesus your need for him he says come back to him hold fast to him because this is what's coming so our third point more briefly we've heard the judgment of God is decisive the judgment of God brings justice thirdly tonight the judgment of God leads to songs of his rescue before the judgment John saw into heaven at the beginning of chapter 14 and there are these people who are completely safe in verse one then I looked and there before me was the lamb standing on Mount Zion and with him 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads that's a symbolic number we've had it already in Revelation it's the multitude it's everyone who's put their trust in

[32 : 46] Jesus 12 times 12 times a thousand and the point of it being a number there is the size of it but also that not one of them is missing Jesus knows every one of us and then John hears this wonderful noise it's meant to be this glorious wonderful noise verse 2 and I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder the sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps and they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders no one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth so this is every Christian it's everyone who's trusted the promises of God in the throne room of heaven with the angels that's the elders there and the living creatures and they're singing this new song and then in chapter 15 verse 2 if we flick over we hear the song we're back in the throne room again with John it's calm notice it talks about that sea of glass so for all the chaos in our world it's calm in heaven and now we hear the song verses 3 and 4 we're told it's the song of

Moses and the song of the lamb in other words it's the song of a people rescued by God because of his mighty arm and his mighty hand and outstretched arm the ultimate rescue just like in the days of Moses when they sang when they crossed the Red Sea well in heaven here are a people rescued by him and it's the song of the lamb because it's the song about Jesus because we've been rescued by him and the fact that we will sing in celebration and praise confirms that on that day we will really see sin for what it is and we'll see how holy God is and we'll be praising God for the judgment that's come verse 3 great and marvelous are your deeds Lord God Almighty just and true are your ways king of the nations who will not fear you Lord and bring glory to your name for you alone are holy all nations will come and worship before you for your righteous acts have been revealed that is in this judgment that brings salvation the response of everyone who has put their trust in the lamb is praise

God praise God because he's righteous and his judgments are just and true he gets it right and he says to us tonight just over the horizon we have this secure future with him where we will be lost in wonder we'll be taken up with joyful celebration and overwhelmed with gratitude and really the more we can grasp the reality of what we're seeing here tonight in this coming judgment the more our lives can be transformed now by the sense of gratitude of being saved I think if deep down you don't really believe that God's going to judge the world and that hell is real you can still believe that God loves you but it's just kind of mildly comforting but if you grasp that this kind of judgment really is coming to our world from a holy God who is furious rightly about sin then it opens your heart to be transformed by the love that he's shown us that in verse 3 of chapter 15 he is the lamb he is our

Passover lamb and we've been given this graphic glimpse of what he has saved us from and what it cost him what he endured that he took on himself your full measure of the judgment of God he bore the torment he endured the sulfur so that he could gather you in his hand think of the cost that when he asked his father to take this cup from me he knew he was facing chapter 14 verse 10 the wine of God's wrath poured full strength in the cup of his anger for our sin and he did that so that God could look on you and me and say what he says in chapter 14 verse 5 these people are blameless and so when we see him coming with his sickle to gather in the wheat harvest we can see him making sure absolutely no one will be lost no one will be missing because he's paid such a great cost for us and before he brings the righteous justice our world needs he will make sure he finds you with that sickle and gathers you in his hand to keep you safe instead of your blood being poured out of the winepress it was his blood that flowed from the thorns on his head and the nails on his hands and his wounded side let's pray together just a moment of quiet then I'll lead us in a prayer

Lord Jesus we marvel at this picture of you now risen glorified the son of man victorious now ready to bring the judgment to our world that we need and we cry out for may your spirit move each of us to grasp more deeply your love for us and to hold fast to you that we would endure and take up on that last day our place among the saints praising you for your judgment that for us will be deliverance redemption salvation and we ask this for your name's sake amen amen well I said I would take a couple of questions so