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Comfort for the Afflicted; Affliction for the Comfortable

Revelation 14

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series: Bookends: The Story of Creation & Consummation from Genesis & Revelation

There is a conversation in a *Peanuts* comic strip that takes place between Charlie Brown and Sally. Charlie Brown is sitting in front of the TV set in his bean bag chair when his little sister Sally approaches him. Sally says, "I memorized the Bible verse we were supposed to memorize for Sunday." Charlie asks, "What verse?" Sally responds, "I don't know, now you made me forget. Maybe it's something Moses said, or something from the book of Re-evaluation." Charlie says, "Forgetting is not always a bad thing."

Actually it's not a bad mistake. Re-evaluation. That's really what the book of Revelation is intended to do. Revelation should cause us to seriously re-evaluate how we understand what's happening in the world. But most of all, the book of Revelation causes us to re-evaluate ourselves.

We come this morning to Revelation 14. This is part of a larger section that's all about the war behind all wars. It's all about a great cosmic battle. In one of his visions John saw a woman with Child who represents the people of God. He also saw a great red dragon who is "*the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan*" (12:9). The dragon waited for the woman, planning to devour her child when he was born, but his plan failed. The child, of course, is Jesus. Through his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension the dragon was defeated; bounced out of heaven; thrown down to earth. Because of his defeat he's filled with rage and goes after the woman, the people of God, the followers of Jesus.

But not directly. He does all this through two beasts. In chapter 13 John saw a seven-headed beast from the sea. He also saw a beast from the earth who performed miracles so people would worship and serve the first beast. There is little doubt that in John's mind the first beast was Rome and its emperors as persecutors of the church who claimed divine authority and demanded worship. But the beast is more than the Roman Empire. John's vision grew out of his own situation, but there continues to be beastly political, secular and even religious powers that demand our worship today. Its complete fulfillment won't come until the end of the age when the beast will be the final personification of evil in a man scripture calls antichrist.

The point of Revelation 12-13 is as long as we live in this world as followers of Jesus, we'll find ourselves in the middle of a battle. The dragon will do all he can to wreak havoc in our lives and to keep us and as many people as possible from serving Christ.

This brings us to Revelation 14. Chapter 14 is another one of those interludes in Revelation where we get a glimpse of the end. It's another reminder of how the story ends. And John doesn't show us this for fun but for a purpose. The purpose is re-

evaluation. He wants those who are suffering or who might have to suffer because of their loyalty to Jesus to be comforted. He wants to give them hope and encouragement. He wants them to stay true to him no matter what. He says, "Your situation isn't as bad as it seems. I know now it seems like you're having to give up so much, I know it feels like you're the losers, but in fact let me show you something that will help you re-evaluate your life."

But that's not all. He also wants those who are comfortable to re-evaluate their lives as well. He wants to shake them up. He wants to warn them. Some of these people are overtly allied with the beast; others are tempted to be. Throughout Revelation John calls them "*the people of the earth.*" This is their home. They like it here because all is well. But John says, "Maybe if I showed you the end you might reconsider."

We can divide chapter 14 into three sections which I've titled: Comfort, Call and Condemnation. Let's look at each of these.

Comfort: The destiny of those who belong to the Lamb will be to worship Him in heaven.

"Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one could learn the song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been purchased from the earth. These are the ones who have not been defiled with women, for they have kept themselves chaste. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These have been purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb. And no lie was found in their mouth; they are blameless" (verses 1-5).

We start with comfort. There is a stark contrast between how chapter 13 ends and how chapter 14 begins. What a relief to turn from the dragon and his beasts to the Lamb! The first beast came up out of the rolling sea but the Lamb stands on firm, high and holy ground. This is a vision of Jesus Christ, standing victorious on Mt. Zion, part of the heavenly city; a place of safety and refuge. We might have expected Jesus to appear as a lion here rather than a lamb. After all, a lion is powerful, king of the

beasts! But victory came not through a display of power but through the cross, through the Lamb who was slain.

The Lamb isn't alone. With him are 144,000. In chapter 7 John described this same group as those who were sealed by God for protection. Now he sees that those who were sealed have indeed been kept safe; they're in heaven. Instead of the mark of the beast (666) they have the name of the Lamb's Father on their foreheads. These are the people of God throughout history. The number 144,000 isn't a literal number but it's symbolic of both Old Testament and New Testament believers.

John hears a loud voice which must have sounded like some spectacular concert. He likens it to a waterfall, a clap of thunder, an orchestra of harpists (so this is where the idea came from that we'll be playing harps in heaven). In addition to the orchestra there is a choir, which sang a new song before God and an angelic audience. Their song choice was unique to them. No one else knew this song or could even sing it if they tried. It was a new song; the song of those redeemed by the Lamb. Angels can't sing that song; they haven't been redeemed! Only humans experience redemption and can sing this new song.

This vision John sees and shares is meant to bring comfort. It's meant to comfort the afflicted. When the dragon and the beast seem to be winning every battle, you can take heart because the day will come when you'll stand with the Lamb on Mt. Zion and sing a new song. Whatever suffering and hardship and affliction you have to endure now as a follower of the Lamb is worth it because that's where you're headed. It's like in the darkest chapter John has allowed us to peek at how the story ends and it ends wonderfully, and we can't wait to get there.

But there is something else happening here. In the midst of this battle, what are we to do? Do we just sit around and practice playing the harp? No! What about all those people who are just blindly wandering through life with no idea of what's at stake? This brings us to the second section—Call.

Call: A proclamation goes out to all people to fear God and give Him glory because the hour for judgment has come.

In this call, a proclamation goes out to all people. This call will be voiced by three angels. But angels in Revelation often correspond to earthly realities. What these angels reflect is what **we** are to do. Followers of the Lamb participate in this call as well. Somehow together, angels and the church are God's Fed Ex system of delivery to bring a message, a kind of last minute call to people of the earth. Look at the work of the first angel.

“And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; and he said with a loud voice, ‘Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters’” (verses 6–7).

This first angel preaches *“the eternal gospel”* to every person on earth. No one is left out. The message is simple: Fear God, give him glory, worship him. Why? Because the hour of judgment has come. You might be thinking, “That doesn't sound like the gospel to me. Doesn't gospel means good news? Where's the good news in that message?” But it **is** good news. It's not too late. You can still repent. You can still survive God's judgment. You can still be saved. Fear him. Worship him. Give him glory.

The second angel has a slightly different message. **“And another angel, a second one, followed, saying, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality’” (v.8).** He pronounces the fall of Babylon. Babylon was an ancient city long since fallen. It was known for luxury and corruption. It came to be symbolic of any corrupt nation or system of government that rebels against God. Rome was the Babylon of John's day. She made the nations drink the wine of her immorality. Some might even see the USA as a budding Babylon. The angel announces to the people of the earth, **“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!”** Any nation which seeks to live apart from God can't survive. It's only a matter of time before it collapses. But there is good news even in this. One way for people trapped within an ungodly system to hear the gospel is for that system to collapse. When they see what a house of cards it really is, they're more likely re-evaluate and turn to the One who can really save them.

“Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name’” (verses 9–11).

Finally, a third angel announces an even more serious warning. It's hard to see how this is good news, but the fact that people are being warned means they can do something about it. If you worship the beast and receive his mark you'll become the object of God's wrath through eternity. This is what we call hell. Hell is real. I don't how much of this passage we should take literally and how much is symbolic but I know it's a real place and I know I don't want to go there.

We wonder, how can a God of love do this? Some of us want to pit the God of love against the God of wrath. Like you have to choose one or the other. But don't forget in the Bible God's wrath is something we choose for ourselves. That's why these angels are sending this message in the first place! You see, before hell is an experience inflicted by God, it's a state we ourselves choose by retreating from the light God shines in our heart to lead us to himself. Like it or not, God takes our choices seriously.

All God does in eternal judgment is give us the full implications of the choices we've made. Nobody will endure the wrath of God except those who choose it. God's respect for our choices may be a bit scary, but it's just and fair. This is a far cry from the cruel and irresponsible inflicting of pain that people often think of when the subject of Hell comes up.

Unfortunately, we tend to think of God's wrath in ways that are far too human. We've pictured a wrathful God as a larger version of a wrathful us—wounded pride, ticked off, petty. Because we are most wrathful when we're least loving, we assume that's true of God as well. That's why we think we have to choose between a God of love and a God of wrath. But to speak of God's wrath is also to speak of his passionate love pitted against all that opposes what is good and right. God's wrath is the expression of his love and justice that won't allow his people to suffer forever without hope, nor forever abandon those who trust in him. That's why the next two verses are directed at believers.

"Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, 'Write, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!"' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them'" (verses 12–13).

These words were written to Christ followers who were suffering, being kicked around, being beaten and killed. What they needed to know to hang on and persevere is that it won't go on forever. The day will come when God will judge your enemies and you will be at rest. If you die, you die in the Lord and you're blessed.

Condemnation: The destiny of those who reject the Lamb and worship the beast will be to endure the wrath of God.

Comfort. Call. And, finally, Condemnation. In verses 14–20 three more angels appear and they're involved in a great harvest. The harvest was Jesus' favorite metaphor, especially when he spoke about the end. Jesus himself said judgment on the last day will be like separating the weeds from the wheat. He said *"the Son of Man will send forth his angels"* to do this (Mt.13:37–39). John sees a coming harvest as well.

"Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand. And another angel came out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, 'Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.' Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped. And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle. Then another angel, the one who has power over fire, came out from the altar; and he called with a

loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, saying, 'Put in your sharp sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, because her grapes are ripe.' So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses' bridles, for a distance of two hundred miles" (verses 14–20).

There are two parts to this scene. The first part seems to picture a harvest of grain. *"One like the Son of Man"* is the reaper with a sickle in his hand. An angel brings a message to him from the throne that it's time to reap. He wields his sickle and the earth is harvested. This is surely the Lord Jesus at his second coming. Since the second scene seems to be all about God's wrath, many believe verses 14–16 picture the ingathering of God's people for salvation.

The second part (verses 17–20) pictures a grape harvest. If you ever wondered where John Steinbeck came up with the title of his book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, it must have been here. The Son of Man is left out of the grape harvest and instead two angels are involved. This harvest of grapes isn't a happy scene. Grapes are thrown into *"the great winepress of the wrath of God"* and taken outside the city and trampled underfoot. The vision of blood rising some four feet and extending for 200 miles pictures a radical judgment where every vestige of evil and every trace of hostility to the reign of God is crushed.

If we take this chapter as a whole Jesus Christ bookends the whole story. At the beginning he is the Lamb standing on Mt. Zion with his people. Here at the end he is sitting on a cloud as the Son of Man with his sickle. In the first part he comforts the afflicted by giving them a vision of their ultimate security. In the second part he afflicts the comfortable by giving them a vision of their ultimate insecurity as those who align themselves with the beast.

A proper vision of the ultimate end of all people will comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

That's what a proper vision will do: re-evaluation. You belong to the Lamb. You're going through hell on earth, you're afflicted in every way, you're being threatened with death if you don't align yourself with the beast. But you're comforted by this vision of the end. You're comforted to know you'll one day stand with the Lamb on Mt. Zion and those who torment you will soon receive their just due. Knowing this helps you *"persevere and keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus."* That's re-evaluation.

But those who worship the beast must re-evaluate as well. You should listen to the last minute warning that *"the hour of judgment has come."* You're comfortable now. All is well because you *"worship the beast and his image."* The beast gives you everything you need and want. You drink freely from the wine of the passion of the world's immorality. Life is good. But John's

vision forces re-evaluation: if you continue on this path, you'll be trampled outside the city and your blood will flow through the streets.

But there is still another group we should consider in this. In the letters Jesus wrote to the churches in chapters 2–3 he had some rather discomfoting things to say to people who called themselves Christians and warmed the seats of churches on Sunday morning. He said to the church at Ephesus, *“you have left your first love...repent and do the deeds you did at first...”* (2:4–5). He said to the church at Thyatira, *“you tolerate the woman Jezebel... and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols”* (2:20–21). And he said to the church at Laodicea, *“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth”* (3:15–16).

Just because we call ourselves Christians and go through some of the outward motions of Christians—go to church, put a fish sticker on the back of our car, and drop a few dollars into the offering basket—doesn't mean we're safe. Maybe we **all** need some re-evaluation. It's worth asking the question, How do I know if I'm one of the Lamb's people? How do I know whether this chapter should comfort me or afflict me? Fortunately, we have a very clear answer to that question right up in verses 4–5 where the Lamb's people are described by several distinguishing marks. What are they?

First it says *“they've been purchased”* by God. This means they belong to God; he's redeemed them through the blood of Christ. They don't belong to themselves, but to God. It's like what Paul said to the Corinthians, *“do you not know that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price”* (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Do you know you belong to God?

That's not all. It also says *“they've not defiled themselves with women, for they have kept themselves chaste.”* He's not talking about literal virginity. In the Old Testament God accused his people of spiritual adultery when they went after other gods. That's what he's talking about here. Paul once said he wanted to present believers to Christ *“as a pure virgin”* (2 Cor. 11:2). This is saying the Lamb's people, both men and women, keep themselves pure for him; they don't defile themselves by worshipping or serving anything but him. Are you pure?

The next thing he says about the Lamb's people is they *“follow the Lamb wherever he goes.”* They get that their life isn't their own. He leads; they follow. Sometimes he leads them to places they would rather not go, even to death, but they still follow him. Can you say, “I'm in this job, this relationship, this investment because I followed the Lamb there”?

But there is even more. He calls them *“first fruits to God and to the lamb.”* First fruits were an offering people made. It was a

way of saying that all they had belongs to God. Do you see your whole life as an offering to God? Do you compartmentalize life? Do you say, “That is God's but this is mine. Sunday morning is God's but the rest of the week is mine. A few dollars in the offering is God's but the rest of my money is mine”? Or do you say, “It's all yours because I'm yours”?

Finally, they're people of integrity. He says *“no lie was found in their mouth; they are blameless.”* Does this mean the Lamb's people are perfect? They've never lied? They've never been blameworthy? No. It means you walk in integrity. It means you're committed to these ideals, but when you do lie or you do sin you come clean with it. You don't pretend to be something you're not. You confess it to God.

As I consider all five of these marks of the Lamb's people I can't help but think of how throughout Revelation the people of the Lamb have been described as those who *“do not love their lives even unto death.”* That sums it all up. Let's face it, to a certain extent we all love our own lives. We love our homes and our families and our bodies and our jobs and our friends. That's why we take care of and protect all these things. But how much do we love them? Do we love them more than the Lamb? Do we love them so much that if we had to make a choice between keeping them or following the Lamb we would choose to keep them? Do we love our lives more than the Lamb?

Are you one of the Lamb's people? Maybe you need to do some re-evaluation. If you're not or you're not sure I have some bad news and some good news for you. The bad news is that judgment is coming. The word of God is very clear, isn't it? It's foolish to think that somehow we'll escape that unless we're 100% committed to the Lamb.

But there is good news as well. The good news is that it's not too late to turn to the Lamb. The Lamb is so gracious and so compassionate. If you turn to him he will not turn you away. Did you notice in v.20 how it said that the *“winepress was trodden outside the city”*? When John's first readers heard that they immediately would have thought of Jesus. Outside the city—that's where Jesus was crucified. They would have recalled Jesus' parable about the workers in the vineyard who killed the owner's son outside the city (Mt. 21:39). They would have remembered words from Hebrews that said, *“Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood”* (Heb.13:12). Outside the city is the place where the wrath of God against sin is expressed. Outside is the place where blood flows from the winepress *“up to the horses bridles.”* Here is good news! Jesus shed his blood outside the city so you wouldn't have to shed yours. His blood was enough; it flowed deep and wide and it can cover your sin and mine.