

THE VALLEY OF DECISION

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 14
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Revelation 14

A teacher once asked her student, "Are you good at making decisions"? After thinking for a moment, the student replied, "Well... yes and no".

I have a terrible time making decisions. For me, the big decisions haven't been too hard. Education, marriage, family, job, etc. Those have felt pretty clear. It's all the small decisions in life. Where to eat, what to do with a little bit of free time, what movie to watch on a Friday night. I used to have a policy of flipping a coin.

It was a gimmick. I'd flip the coin and then see how I reacted. If I liked the decision, I'd keep it. If I felt disappointed, I'd do the opposite. It served as a device to figure out what I wanted to do—a way to sort through the complexity of choice and get to some gut level preference.

Decisions are difficult. But our passage this morning talks about just that: a choice that has to be made. It's one of the most graphic and disturbing in all of Revelation. But the pain of this passage is meant to help make that choice easier, not harder. Making decisions can seem complicated, but the powerful imagery of this passage simplifies spiritual decision making.

We're in the midst of a series on the book of Revelation. We called our series "Wake Up" because we want to allow this book to rouse us out of our slumber and pay attention to the reality of the spiritual things of this world.

As we look at chapter 14 this morning, we'll see a glimpse of the choice before mankind and the consequences which follow that choice. This passage looks back to a section of the Old Testament from the prophetic book of Joel. That Scripture describes a valley where choices are made—a place where you follow one path or another. Today we are visiting The Valley of Decision.

There are points in our lives where we face making a choice which we know will change our lives forever. Forks in the road which determine so much of our

future. Will you marry me? Where do you attend college? Do you take the job? Where do you settle your family?

But as important as these choices are, there is a basic spiritual choice to be made in life. A decision about how to orient your life. The importance of this choice dwarfs any of the other ones you might make in life. You have been created by a loving God. Will you orient your life toward him in faith? Or will you turn your back?

Our culture tells us a story that our spiritual choices don't really matter. It doesn't matter whether you go this way or that way, as long as it works for you. Theologians call this "religious pluralism". The book of Revelation challenges that perspective.

This book wakes us up to choices that matter. The world is portrayed as being engaged in a war between God and Satan. But what better way to win a war than to convince everyone that it isn't happening in the first place. We are told that everything is fine. We are led to believe that all paths are equal. But that is not the case.

This passage wakes us up to the gravity of the spiritual decisions that we face.

As we work our way through this chapter, we'll see a choir singing, then two groups of three angels. The first group of angels are saying something. The second group are doing something. First, a choir, then three angels are saying something, and then three angels are doing something

The victorious army

Our passage opens with another picture of the group of 144,000 which we were introduced to in chapter 7.

Revelation 14:1-5:

Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like

the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, 3 and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. 4 It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

We first met the 144,000 people in chapter 7. Last week we heard about people who had the mark of the beast on their forehead or hand. These people have God's name written on them. They are the people of God, gathered at Mount Zion with the Lamb. There are some different opinions as to what is being described, but I understand it to be a military gathering. Let me explain why.

In ancient times, battles would often begin with opposing forces assembled on hills which faced each other. Soldiers preparing for battle would have to abstain from sexual activity to be focused entirely on the task at hand. These soldiers haven't just abstained—they are virgins.

Soldiers also had to be pure. In the Old Testament, all war was a holy war. There was no acceptable military conflict apart from the will of God. Sure enough, these soldiers are called "blameless."

Finally, this crowd is a choir singing a "new song." We most often hear about "new songs" in the Old Testament when Israel had won a significant military victory. Maybe you remember Moses' song after God led his people through the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptian army. This army choir has been given a new song that only they could sing. It was only for those who participated in the victory of God.

So the Lamb is on the mountain gathered with his army. They are celebrating a victory. Amid all the conflict, we are shown a picture of the final victory. That's been common throughout Revelation. We get these glimpses ahead so that we can see how the story ends even before we arrive there. This is a picture of God and the Lamb celebrating the victory with his victorious army.

Revelation portrays a spiritual war between the forces of God and the powers of evil. But at every turn, we are reminded that this is a war that has already been won. We fight, not wondering how things will turn out, but knowing that God has won the victory over sin, death, and evil.

When we settled here, I became a devoted 49ers fan. I like watching football, and they were going to be my team. But a lot of football games happen during church, so I usually record the game and watch it later. Usually, I'm able not to find out who won.

Sometimes I like to look ahead. It's been pretty rare lately, but occasionally I'll find out that the San Francisco 49ers won the football game before I watch it. Then I can watch the game in a whole new light. I can still appreciate the suspense, but honestly, it's a lot more fun. I know they pull out a victory in the end. So I can appreciate the drama without actually getting stressed out.

That's the effect of this section in Revelation. Before we see the drama of the decisions being played out on earth, we are given a picture of victory. We see the 144,000 learning the new song of victory because God's side has won.

That gives us the freedom to anticipate God's victory on earth.

This has the potential to change the way we approach life. Often our circumstances make it look like we are losing. It seems like we are being crushed. It seems like God isn't relevant anymore. It seems like Jesus is outdated. It seems like churches are backwards and unnecessary and even sometimes harmful to society. It looks like faith doesn't help, and prayer doesn't work and being happy is all that matters.

But then we see the saints gathered to celebrate the victory of God and we remember. We remember! We remember that God is sovereign, and Jesus has defeated evil. We remember that God has already won and history is moving toward a final restoration of all things. Remembering God's victory allows us to look forward to what he will do in history.

Can you watch your life unfold like a football game where you know who wins? Can you wake up to the spiritual reality of God's victory on this earth? It will completely change your perspective if you can. You will need to be assured of God's victory if you're going to face the spiritual decision that occurs next.

Proclaiming the choice

After the song of victory from the choir, our passage continues with the first of the sets of angels. These first three angels have something to say.

Revelation 14:6-11:

Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water." 8 Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion [of her sexual immorality]." 9 And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."

Three different angels are making three different proclamations. The first one preaches an eternal Gospel. The second one makes a declaration about the state of Babylon. The third offers a warning about those who would worship the beast. The good news of the Gospel. The bad news about Babylon. And a warning. Good news, bad news, and a warning.

Let's look at each of these in turn. The good news is described as an eternal Gospel. This angel proclaims it to "those who dwell on the earth." Throughout Revelation, that phrase has always referred to those who don't follow Jesus. The message is given "to every nation and tribe and language and people." That's the good news of the Gospel.

But it's immediately followed by the bad news. "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great." By the time Revelation was written, Babylon had been fallen for centuries, but that city became a kind of code word to refer to Rome. It was too dangerous to talk about Rome,

but Babylon was a symbol of that world power. This angel does something common in the Bible: he refers to a future event in the past tense to indicate that this will definitely happen.

So these people in the first century look back to Babylon and see that the kingdom which once ruled the world has fallen. They live amid Rome—a kingdom which looks like it will last forever. But this reminds them that even Rome will fall.

We sit here in Palo Alto and look back on Babylon, which has fallen. We also look back on Rome and see that indeed, it did fall, just like John prophesied that it would. And so we look at the kingdom that we live in—you might call it the Kingdom of Silicon Valley—and we are given the awareness that even this kingdom will fall.

We would be fools to think that this kingdom is the one that will last forever. And yet, many people in our valley live like that is true. As if technology and Silicon Valley is the kingdom which will finally manage to conquer the world with its message of universal prosperity and happiness for everyone.

We need to hear this news preached to us: "Fallen, fallen is Silicon Valley the Innovative." We need to hear that the kingdom we live in will not last forever. We need to hear the angel declaring that we cannot count on Silicon Valley to make life work.

This is the reason for the message of the Gospel. The bad news of Babylon's fall is why we need the good news of the Gospel of Jesus. The ship is sinking! Things may look like they're going great, but they are not.

That gives rise to the warning of the third angel. "If anyone worships the beast and its image..." If you align yourself to the kingdoms of this world, things will not turn out well for you. People who join themselves to the kingdom of the beast will suffer when that kingdom falls. It's a bleak and disturbing vision, "he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb ... the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever."

The image here is another military one. This is a picture of a defeated city. Armies would burn cities after they won a victory. The smoke of this defeated kingdom rises up for all of eternity. This is why we preach through the Bible at PBC. It'd be really easy to skip over verses like this. It seems so harsh. So painful.

This is the reality of what happens when you worship the beast. When you worship the gods of Silicon Valley, you will eventually realize that they can't save you. All that this kingdom of the world offers won't meet the basic need that lies within you.

But the Gospel which has been proclaimed will. Jesus has offered you the victory. You can join with the Lamb or worship the beast. When decisions are this important, we have to be careful. We have to choose wisely.

Do you live your life like Silicon Valley has fallen? Are you able to free yourself from the frenzy and the ambition and the competition and the pride and the materialism of this place? If someone looked at your life, would they just assume that you've thrown your lot in with all that Silicon Valley has to offer?

Sure, maybe you come to church on Sunday to worship Jesus, but does the rest of your life look any different? Have you chosen the eternal Gospel? Do you live your life like you've made that choice?

Remember that the purpose of the book of Revelation is to encourage followers of the Lamb to stay faithful. We are reminded of us by a very clear encouragement in the middle of this chapter. It's a repeat from a phrase we heard last week in chapter 13.

Revelation 14:12-13:

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. 13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

The whole goal is to be faithful to the Lamb. Silicon Valley doesn't seem to be fallen, but it is. Don't compromise with the beast. Persevere with your faith in Jesus. We will be blessed. We will rest from our labors. We will eventually join in the victory of the Lamb.

Choose wisely and keep choosing wisely.

Proclaiming the consequence

One of the things that makes Revelation so valuable is the glimpse it gives us into what might happen in the future. We saw the choir of victory. We heard the words

of the first three angels. Now we see the actions of the next three angels.

Revelation 14:14-20:

Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." 16 So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped. 17 Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." 19 So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. 20 And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

Once again, this vision that John sees is full of symbolic imagery. We encountered the "one like a son of man" at the very beginning of Revelation. That's also a reference to the messianic figure that the prophet Daniel saw. This is the title of a king—the title of one who will come to set all things right.

These three angels describe two different harvests. Two times a sickle is swung, and the earth is reaped. The first seems to be a grain harvest. The second is a grape harvest. Commentators disagree about how these two harvests are related. Are they both judgments on evil? Or is the first describing salvation and the second describing judgment?

We have to look at some of the other passages that his scene echoes to come to a conclusion. Jesus talked about a harvest in Mark 4:29. He says that "when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." Jesus takes the harvest imagery and applies it to gathering his followers together in salvation.

But John's vision also points back to some language in the Old Testament book of Joel. Joel talked a lot about

"the day of the LORD." This was the time when God would finally act to restore his creation. It was a day to the feared and a day to hope for all at the same time. At the end of the book, Joel talks about judging the enemies of God. Here's Joel 3:12-13.

Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. 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's harvest seems to be one of judgment. The enemies of God are invited to a valley. But in the next verse, we hear how that valley is described.

Joel 3:14:

Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.

We are visiting the valley of decision. So a choice can be made. That makes me believe that the first harvest is a picture of salvation and the second is a picture of judgment. There's a strong parallel with the first angels. The second group of angels show the different consequences for the options given by the first set of angels. The earth is going to be harvested. Either for salvation or judgment.

This is the valley of decision. Let me suggest that we live in the valley of decision. Multitudes are gathered in Silicon Valley. We believe that the day of the LORD is near. We believe that our choices matter because God has given us the dignity of free will. Perhaps Silicon Valley is the valley of decision.

But how do people choose God? How do people join forces with the Lamb instead of worshipping the beast?

Maybe you remember this scene earlier in the book of Revelation. Six angels blew six trumpets, which unleashed terrible judgment on the earth. And we heard in Rev 9:20 that "the rest of mankind did not repent of the works of their hands." It seemed that God allowing people to experience the consequence of their choices didn't help them recognize him.

But the picture in Revelation 14 is different. Something else has happened. The angels have proclaimed an eternal Gospel. They have shown people the choice that they have. And now, after the Gospel has

been proclaimed, there are two different harvests—one of salvation and one of judgment.

Here's the point: the preaching of the Gospel changes things. When the Gospel is preached, people have a choice. Back in the book of Joel, we see God inviting people to gather in the valley of decision. They are invited to make their choice about God.

If Silicon Valley is a valley of decision, then we can invite people to see that. We can invite people to the valley of decision.

When the Gospel is preached, people have a choice. When they are told about who God is and how he works, they can decide how to respond to him. This doesn't mean we force them into a decision. It doesn't even mean that we ask them to decide. Inviting them to the valley of decision means we proclaim the Gospel to them.

This is the message of this chapter, not just that the people of God endure and wait out the difficulties of life. But that the people of God stay faithful as a witness to the truth of who God is. We have a part to play in the day of the LORD. We are messengers like the angels. We are given the eternal Gospel to preach to the world.

The day of the LORD is near in the Silicon Valley of decision. Do you believe that? Do you believe that the day is near?

The book of Revelation wakes us up to the very real consequences of our spiritual choices. We are shown in vivid detail where the paths before us lead. We aren't forced into a decision. We are shown the destinations of various paths.

That's what it means to proclaim the eternal Gospel. You can't decide for anyone. But you can invite them to the valley of decision. Show them the landscape. Help clear away the fog so they can see the importance of their spiritual decisions.

Conclusion

Everyone faces a valley of decision at some point. And it's becoming culturally inappropriate, even offensive, to suggest that my spiritual decision should have any bearing on your spiritual decision. A lot of people think that spiritual choices aren't important. Maybe we should flip a coin.

But the book of Revelation wakes us up. This dramatic picture of proclamation, salvation and judgment. We have to remember this reality. We have to see clearly through the fog of pluralism and understand how critical our choices are.

If you are wrestling with your own spiritual decision, I think God has you here for a reason so that you can see this picture. The stakes are high. Do you want to align yourself with a failing kingdom? Or do you want to accept salvation from Jesus, who sacrificed himself so that you could live?

You have heard the eternal Gospel. What choice will you make?

Next week we'll kick off a new preaching series for the season of Lent. During Lent, we prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus—the defining historical event for what we believe. This year we'll be doing so by examining the kinds of barriers people face in choosing to put their faith in Jesus.

What barriers do people face for believing in Jesus? What obstacles do we face for telling people about Jesus?

For months now, the church leadership has been praying about how we can be bolder in our witness of Christ. In the weeks leading up to Easter, we want to focus on how we can be more invitational and welcoming. We're planning a big Easter Egg community event the Saturday before Easter. We're holding three services on Easter Sunday to accommodate more people. We're hosting a class for people to explore faith in Jesus immediately following Easter.

Much of this comes from what we've seen in the book of Revelation. This book encourages us to be faithful witnesses to the truth of Jesus Christ. We've been asking God to help us move in that direction. We're trusting the Spirit to empower us as we do so.

If we live in the valley of decision, let's proclaim the truth boldly and clearly. Wake up to the reality of salvation and judgment. Be faithful as a witness of Jesus.