

THE LAMB IS THE LORD

A journey through the Book of Revelation

5 ► The War of the Worlds



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Crucifixion by the Romans by Vasily Vereshchagin. Jesus's death on the Cross was the decisive victory over Satan (see Revelation 12:7-10). In this magnificent panorama, the artist focuses on the crowd. We, the viewers, almost become part of the crowd, peering over the mass of people to get a closer look. The sky is dark and glowering. Among the crowd, Roman soldiers with their spears and lances stand ready to quieten disorder. Two officials talk with a Roman soldier on the hill.

The Woman and her Offspring (12:1-17)

Escape from the dragon (12:1-6)

Revelation 12:1 to 15:4 is 'a story within the story'. It leads us through the whole Bible story from before the birth of Jesus to His coming again at the end of this age and the great Day of Judgment. This section is the heart of the whole book.

The curtain rises; the drama begins. A "great sign" appears in heaven—"a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (12:1). This woman is pregnant; she cries out "in birth pains" (12:2). Who is this woman? As so often, we must turn to the Old Testament for clues. This woman recalls Genesis 37:9-10. There we read that



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"A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant . . . Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads." (12:1-3)

Joseph tells his brothers and his father Jacob about a dream he had: "Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me" (Genesis 37:9). His father, whom God named "Israel" (Genesis 32:28) rebukes him: "Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow . . . before you?" (37:10). So the sun, moon and stars seem to represent "Israel" and his family, from whom the twelve tribes of Israel were descended (see Genesis 49:28). So this woman, at this point in the vision, seems to represent the nation of Israel, from among whom Jesus the Messiah was born.

Being clothed with the sun suggests God has invested her with radiant glory; the starry crown reminds us of the victory wreath that God gives as a reward to His faithful people; the moon under her feet may perhaps symbolise dominion over this world, where Satan rules.

Another sign appears in heaven. To our shock, it's "an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns" (12:3 NIV). It bears "seven crowns" on its heads (12:3 NIV). This dragon is none other than "that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (12:9). Its horns symbolise its oppressive strength and power; the crowns tell us that

it claims kingship over this world. We'll learn more about this red dragon in our next part.

With a great swish of its tail this dragon sweeps down "a third of the stars of heaven" and flings them "to the earth" (12:4). These "stars" may symbolise angels who followed Satan in rebelling against God. But they more likely echo Daniel's prophecy about the "little horn", which symbolises a brutal persecutor of God's people in the second century BC called Antiochus Epiphanes. This tyrant "threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them" (Daniel 8:10 NIV). These stars seem to symbolise God's people: Daniel 12:3 tells us that God's faithful people are "like the stars". So it's likely that Satan's assault on the stars in Revelation 12:4 pictures his persecution of God's people in the millennia before Jesus's birth.

The murderous dragon waits, ready to devour the woman's child. Tragedy seems inevitable.

The woman bears "a male child"—a child destined "to rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (12:5). This phrase echoes Psalm 2:7-9: "The LORD said to me, 'You are my Son; . . . Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, . . . You shall break them with a rod of iron

and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." The "Son" is the Davidic king. Ultimately, of course, that King is Jesus. As Gabriel said to Mary, "He will . . . be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, . . . and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:32-33). Jesus is the King "who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (12:5, see also 19:15 and compare 2:27). Jesus has authority over the nations (prophesied in Psalm 2:7-9). He will crush the nations' rebellion—the repentant will turn from their rebellion and become His disciples; the unrepentant will be "thrown into the lake of fire" (20:15). This is the opening barrage of a cosmic power struggle. Who will rule this world? The dragon? Or the Son?

There were multiple attempts on Jesus's life. Not long after His birth, king Herod tries, and fails, to kill Jesus (Matthew 2:16-18). From the start of His public ministry, Jesus begins to encounter rejection. The Jews in the synagogue at Nazareth try to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:28-30). He eludes arrest or worse at least twice more (John 8:59, 10:39 and see also John 5:18). The final plot to destroy Him is triggered into action by Judas's betrayal (John 11:46-57 and Luke 22:1-6). Jesus is handed over to the Roman authorities to be executed. Satan thought he'd achieved his aim.

But the woman's child is safe! He's "caught up to God and to his throne" (12:5). Jesus dies and rises from death, and ascends to His Father, who seats Him "at his right hand in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:20). Jesus's life, death, resurrection and ascension are all encapsulated in these few words. The dragon has failed. His ambition to rule the world lies in tatters. *It is our crucified, resurrected and ascended Lord who reigns!*

But will the woman now fall prey to the dragon's murderous rage?

No—she's safe, too! She flees "into the wilderness". There she has "a place prepared by God", a place where she's "to be nourished for 1,260 days" (12:6). The woman now represents *God's New Testament people*. As we saw in the last part, this period of time (equal to 42 months) symbolises a period during which God's people suffer tribulation, but are kept by God from ultimate harm.

In the background here is Israel's Exodus journey through the wilderness, a journey characterised by the number 42. Forty-two camping places are listed (Numbers 33:1-49), and the journey can be calculated to have lasted about 42 years. On that journey God miraculously provided for His people. They lacked nothing (Deuteronomy 2:7).

God's people today also live in a wilderness—the hostile wilderness of this world. During this period of '42

months', the nations assault them (11:2), but they faithfully proclaim the gospel (11:3). This wilderness is a place of peril. But in that wilderness is "a place prepared by God", a place where God protects and provides for us.

War in Heaven (12:7-12)

The dragon is defeated

Jesus escapes the murderous dragon. God's people, too, are safe from the dragon's grasp. They're cared for by God in "the wilderness". But *how* did Jesus and God's people evade the dragon? The next few verses tell us. *This passage is the key to the entire book of Revelation.*

We read, "war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back . . ." (12:7). All the battles of the world taken together pale into insignificance before *this* great battle. The dragon "was defeated" (12:8) when Jesus died, rose again and ascended to His Father's right hand. *The decisive moment was His death.*

What we read here recalls Genesis 3:15. God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel". From that moment, there was war. There would be conflict between Satan and Eve, and between their offspring—people who follow Satan and those who follow God. But, one day, a single offspring descended from Eve would crush Satan. *The decisive battle in that conflict has now been fought and won.* Jesus, the Offspring of the woman, has crushed Satan and defeated him.

That decisive moment of defeat was located *on Earth*, on the Cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. But in 12:7-9, we see Christ's victory on Earth taking effect *in heavenly places*.

How did Michael and his angels get involved? Who, in fact, *is* Michael? He's a very powerful angel, "the great prince who has charge of" God's people (Daniel 12:1, see also Daniel 10:13,21). When Jesus died and rose from death and ascended to God's right hand, Satan could no longer come before God in heaven and bring charges against God's people. We can, perhaps, imagine what happened like this. At the moment Satan's defeat was secured, God, the Judge, banished him from heaven. Michael and his angels executed that sentence. They hurled Satan and his angels down to the Earth.

In 12:10 we're told that Satan is "the accuser of our brothers"—*the accuser of God's people*. It seems so appropriate that it was *the angelic guardian of God's people, and his angels*, who threw Satan and his forces down to the Earth.



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“Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, . . . and his angels were thrown down with him.” (Revelation 12:7-9)

The great dragon, “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world . . . was thrown down to the earth, and his angels . . . with him” (12:9). There was “no longer any place for them in heaven” (12:8). Satan can no longer come before God in heaven to accuse God’s people.

God’s Kingdom has come

A jubilant voice rings out, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come” (12:10). This echoes what we read when the seventh trumpet sounded: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (11:15). The dragon is defeated. The Kingdom of God has now come, and with it “the authority of his Christ”.

Have we arrived at the end of this age? No. Two thousand years have passed; Satan still rages against God and His people. The end has not yet come. The

Kingdom of God has come, *but it hasn’t yet come in its final glory*—that will happen when Jesus returns.

But the Kingdom *has* come. Before His transfiguration, Jesus declared, “there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power” (Mark 9:1). *The Kingdom came with power when Jesus died, rose again, ascended, and poured out the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.*

The festival of Pentecost was a harvest festival; it celebrated the end of the grain harvest. On that Day of Pentecost, God began to reap the greatest harvest the world will ever see. The Holy Spirit is the Reaper. He’s gathering a great harvest of people into God’s Kingdom. Countless multitudes are being rescued from the dominion of darkness and transferred into the Kingdom of God (see Colossians 1:13). God’s people are citizens of God’s Kingdom. They’re a colony, an outpost, of God’s Kingdom in the midst of a world under Satan’s domination.

Our accuser has been thrown down

The voice continues: “for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down . . .” (12:10). Satan is “the accuser”. ‘Satan’ is a Hebrew word that basically means ‘adversary’. In the New Testament, Satan is often called ‘the devil’, meaning ‘the slanderer’. From the day he first sinned, Satan has slandered God and His people. We see him accuse Job (Job 1:6-12, 2:1-6), and Joshua the high priest (Zechariah 3:1). It seems that Satan was once granted some access to God. And so he seized the opportunity to act as ‘counsel for the prosecution’ and accuse people before God.

But Satan has no right to do that any more. Why? *Because God has justified us!* On the Cross, Jesus endured the penalty for our sins. So God has declared us believers ‘not guilty!’ “There is . . . now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1). Not only that, God credits us with the perfect righteousness of Jesus. We receive “the free gift of righteousness” (Romans 5:17). Now we are right with God, in right relationship with Him.

And so, as Paul asks, “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies” (Romans 8:33). Satan still accuses God’s people. But he has absolutely no legal case against us any more! If anyone does sin, “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins . . .” (1 John 2:1-2).

We are conquerors

We read, “they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb . . .” (12:11), in other words, by His sacrificial death. As we’ve just seen, believers are justified through Jesus’s death. And they have conquered Satan “by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (12:11). Satan is a defeated foe. But he still attacks God’s people. He tries to defeat us by *deception and persecution*.

- *He deceives people*. He deceives unbelievers; he tries to deceive God’s people, too. He “is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44), “the deceiver of the whole world” (12:9). How can God’s people counterattack? *With truth*. They conquer the great liar by their testimony to God’s character, and to “the word of the truth, the gospel” (Colossians 1:5, see also Ephesians 1:13). Satan cannot stand the truth, and so he flees.
- *He persecutes believers*. How do faithful believers respond? By standing firm, refusing to compromise—if necessary, at the cost of their lives. They “loved not their lives even unto death”. But death is no defeat: it’s victory! Their death is their triumph! Remember what we saw in 11:7-13.

We believers fight against Satan in these two ways: by resisting his deception and proclaiming the truth, and by remaining faithful to God “even unto death”. That’s so clearly seen in the spiritual armour that Paul urges us to put on, that we may be able “to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.” (Ephesians 6:11-13). Notice how Paul emphasises that we’re to *stand firm* against Satan and all his cunning schemes (see also 1 Peter 5:8-9). Paul then lists the pieces of armour. We have just one weapon: “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”. The sword is *God’s truth proclaimed with the Holy Spirit’s penetrating power*. Finally, our warfare is to be undergirded by prayer; we’re to pray “at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication”. To that end, we’re to “keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints”.

The heavens rejoice; the earth and sea are doomed

The jubilant voice continues: “rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them!” That surely includes not only God’s holy angels in heaven, but *ourselves*. This is *spiritual* geography, not spatial geography. Our spiritual home is *heaven*. The woman of 12:1, whom we identified as God’s people, appeared as a great sign “in heaven”. And God has “raised us up with” Christ “and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6).

But the voice continues: “woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” (12:12). Satan is now a defeated foe. Little time is left to him, and he is desperate. Like an ensnared and raging beast, he tries to inflict as much damage as he can before he meets his doom. This woe is directed at “earth and sea”. This seems, again, to be *spiritual* geography—this present world under Satan’s domination. The earth is here linked with the sea—the sea here seems to symbolise chaos and opposition to God (for example, Jeremiah 5:22).

From the earth and the sea emerge two evil monsters. We encounter them in the next chapter.

War on Earth (12:13-17)

The dragon has been thrown down to Earth. But does he give up? Far from it. He “pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child” (12:13). This woman, as you’ll recall from 12:6, is in “the wilderness”, cared for



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An artist's image of God's people in the wilderness during the exodus. We read, "By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go" (Nehemiah 9:12). On their journey through the wilderness, God miraculously provided for His people. They lacked nothing (Deuteronomy 2:7). God's people today also live in a wilderness—the hostile wilderness of this world. This wilderness is a place of peril. But in that wilderness is "a place prepared by God" (12:6), where God protects and provides for us.

by God. She represents the true Church, God's New Testament people.

Now we discover how she got to the wilderness: she "was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness" (12:14). Again, the background is Israel's Exodus journey through the wilderness. God delivered His people from Egypt and "bore" them "on eagles' wings" to Himself (Exodus 19:4). Now God is giving His people "the two wings of the great eagle" so they can flee into the wilderness, where they're "to be nourished".

In 12:6, the woman was to be protected and provisioned by God "for 1,260 days"; here she's "to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time"—"a time" represents a year, and "times" two years (12:14). These are the same periods of time; they're equal to 42 months. During this period, the Church is totally dependent on God. In the midst of tribulation, He protects and provides for them.

In 11:1-2, we saw that John was given "a measuring rod" and told: "measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there" (11:1). These are images of God's people in His presence. *Measuring* symbolised that God's people belonged to God and *He would protect them*. But John wasn't to measure "the court outside the temple . . . for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months" (11:2). The "court outside the temple" and "the holy city" are also images of God's people, but seen from a different perspective. They were *unmeasured*—in other words,

vulnerable to persecution. God protects His people; nonetheless, they are persecuted.

Now John sees a vision *that tells a similar story, but with different symbolism*. Now the Church is pictured as a woman and her offspring.

The *woman* seems to symbolise *the Church as whole, and seen from a heavenly viewpoint*. God protects her; she can *never* be destroyed. The dragon spews out a torrent of water against the woman "to sweep her away with a flood" (12:15). From its mouth gushes a stream of slander, lies and deceit, oppression and persecution. As we saw in part 2, this evil torrent battered the churches in Asia. This torrent will continue to batter the Church till Jesus returns. But God protects her "the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river" (12:16). God protects the woman; He protects His Church. The dragon is thwarted.

The *rest of the woman's offspring* seem to be *individual believers here on Earth*. Here on Earth, individual believers suffer persecution. Enraged with the woman, the dragon goes off "to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:7). How does Satan make war on believers here on Earth? We'll soon see how.

The dragon stands "on the sand of the sea" (12:17). The sea, as we've seen, can symbolise chaos and evil. It certainly does here. That's ominous. Why is the dragon standing there? What will he do now?

The Two Beasts (13:1-18)

The beast from the sea (13:1-10)

Enraged with the woman's "offspring", the dragon now sets his two henchmen on them.

The dragon stands on the seashore (12:17). It calls a terrifying monster from out of the sea. From the depths rises a "beast", with "ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name" (13:1 NIV). It's rather like the "enormous red dragon", Satan, which had "seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads" (12:3 NIV)—though this beast has more crowns, and they're on its horns, rather than its heads. This beast is like "a leopard; its feet . . . like a bear's, and its mouth . . . like a lion's mouth". This is the first of the dragon's henchmen. We'll meet the other in a moment.

What does this beast symbolise? Again, as with so much else, we need to turn to the Old Testament for clues. Hundreds of years before, Daniel tells us about a dream in which "four great beasts came up out of the sea" (Daniel 7:1-28). These beasts represented four empires—probably the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman empires respectively. This beast from the sea in Revelation 13:1-8 possesses features of those four beasts; it combines them into one horrific monstrosity. It's allowed to exercise authority "for forty-two months" (13:5). As we've seen, 42 months symbolises a temporary period during which God's people suffer attack by Satan and his forces—but are protected by God from ultimate harm. That period covers the whole time from the Day of Pentecost to Jesus's Second Coming.

This horrific beast seems to picture every government or power that has ever opposed God and His people. Daniel's and John's visions show us these powers in their true light—like savage beasts that terrify and devour. In John's day that anti-Christian power was the Roman Empire. There have been many others through the last 2,000 years. Such powers, of course, exist today. And shortly before Jesus's return, it seems that a single individual—the final Antichrist—will emerge, heading up a dominant global power that unleashes the final and most terrible persecution of God's people.

This beast is a counterfeit 'christ'. It acts as Satan's 'christ'. Notice how it mimics Jesus Christ:

- Jesus receives power (5:12-13); He's seated with His Father on His throne (3:21) and He now has authority (12:10, see Matthew 28:18). The dragon gives this beast "his power and his throne and great authority" (13:2).

- Jesus has followers who have His name—and that of His Father—written on their foreheads (14:1). In 13:16-17 we read about those marked with this beast's "name . . . or the number of its name".
- John sees "a great multitude . . . from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (7:9). This beast is given authority "over every tribe and people and language and nation" (13:7).
- Jesus was slaughtered, and yet is alive (1:18, 5:6,9,12). He was resurrected from the dead. The beast counterfeits Christ's resurrection: one of its heads "seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed", and the whole earth " marvelled as they followed the beast" (13:3). This may well refer to the fact that evil governments and empires have, through history, risen to power only to crumble and fall. But others rise in their place—or they themselves may rise again—to resume Satan's war on God and His people.
- Jesus is worshipped along with the Father (see 5:13). Here, in 13:4, both the dragon and its counterfeit 'christ' are worshipped: "they worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast" (see also 13:8). They declare, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"—with the implication that *no-one* is like the beast. That's a demonic parody of what Moses and God's people sang: "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?" (Exodus 15:11). They think no-one can fight against it; they think it's invincible. But of course, we know otherwise!
- Like the dragon, the beast has seven heads, ten horns, and is crowned (13:1, compare 12:3); the beast is an 'image' of the dragon and thus counterfeits Christ, who is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).
- The beast's crowns (13:1 NIV) mimic Christ's many crowns (19:12 NIV).
- The blasphemous names on the beast's heads (13:1) counterfeit Christ's names (19:11-13,16).

This beast from the sea is a fake 'christ'; it's an anti-Christian power. It speaks "haughty and blasphemous words"—"blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven" (13:5,6). It slanders God; and it tries to usurp His place and demands worship. Not content with that, the beast blasphemes God's people, who are God's dwelling place (as we see in 21:3).

We read that the dragon gives the beast **“his power and his throne and great authority”** (13:2). But the words **“given”** and **“allowed”** (13:5,7) again tell us what’s really going on behind the scenes. God Himself is permitting the beast to do its evil work. Behind all the events of history is the hand of God. *God is in complete control.* Like a chained animal, Satan and all his forces can go so far, but not a millimetre further.

John calls us to listen carefully: **“If anyone has an ear, let him hear”** (13:9). Then we read these sobering words: **“If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain”** (13:10). In 13:7, too, we read that the beast **“was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them”**. All God’s faithful people endure suffering. Some are slain. Antipas was one of those who were slain (2:13).

Jesus Himself warned His disciples, **“You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.”** But He assured them: **“not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives”** (Luke 21:16-19). Jesus, our Commander-in-Chief, says to us, too: **“This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God’s people”** (13:10 NIV). But, whatever we may face, *nothing* can ultimately harm us.

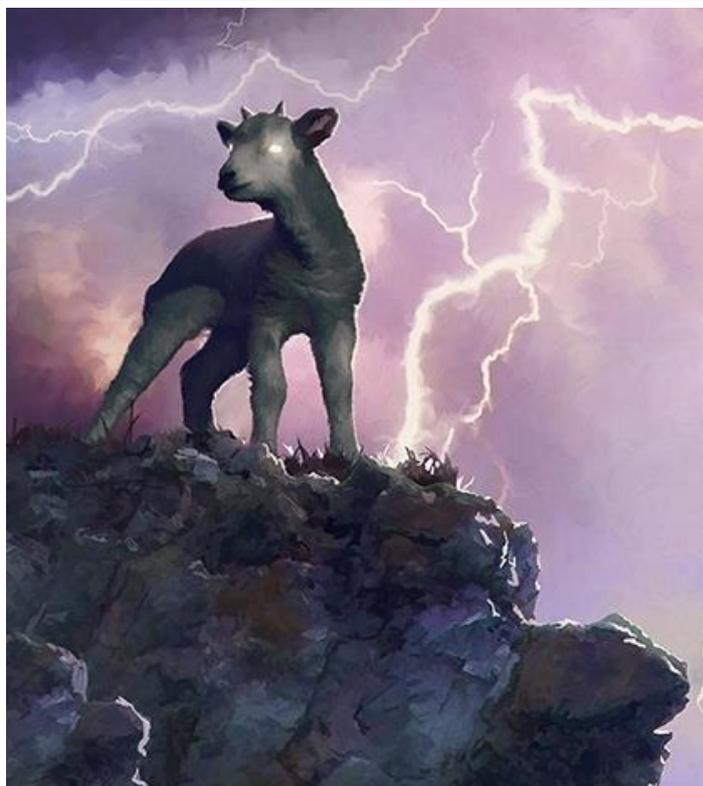
And keep in mind what we’ve read in chapter 12: the great dragon, master of this beast, **“was thrown down to the earth, and his angels . . . with him”** (12:9). Jesus has conquered Satan. And through faithfulness even to death, *we* conquer Satan (see 12:11). And if the dragon—the source and master of the beast—has been conquered, then the beast is surely doomed!

So, throughout the Church age—the symbolic **“42 months”**—God’s people suffer assault from the beast. But they’re quite safe. Their names have been written **“in the Lamb’s book of life”** (21:27, see also 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12,15). Our suffering is only for a season; after that, glory! Paul writes, **“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”** (Romans 8:18).

The beast from the land (13:11-18)

The great deceiver (13:11-15)

Now John sees another beast. This is the second of the dragon’s two henchmen. The first emerged from the sea; this one rises **“out of the earth”** (13:11). It has **“two horns like a lamb”**—it bears a resemblance to the Lamb of God (see 5:6). But this is no lamb—it speaks **“like a dragon”** (13:11). It **“makes the earth and its inhabitants**



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“Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon” (13:11).

worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed” (13:12). It performs **“great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth . . .”** (13:13). By these signs, **“it deceives those who dwell on earth”** (13:14). It tells them to make an image in honour of the first beast (13:14). It’s **“allowed to give breath”** to this image, so that the image can speak and cause anyone who doesn’t worship it to be killed (13:15). This second beast is a great deceiver, just like Satan (12:9). We can think of this second beast as the first beast’s accomplice.

In fact, we met this second beast in part 4. During the sixth bowl judgment, we saw **“three unclean spirits like frogs”** spewing out of the mouths of **“the dragon”, “the beast”,** and **“the false prophet”** (16:13). The **“beast”** here is the sea beast; **“the false prophet”** is this second beast, the beast from the earth. These three—**“the dragon”, “the beast”,** and **“the false prophet”** are what amounts to a *‘demonic trinity’*. The dragon mimics God the Father. The sea beast mimics Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The beast from the earth, alias the **“false prophet”,** mimics the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14); this false prophet draws the world to worship Satan’s ‘christ’, the first beast. The Holy Spirit guides us into truth (John 16:13); the false prophet deceives people. Satan and his henchmen seek to imitate God and mimic what He does.

In 11:3-4 we met two witnesses—symbolising the Church—who prophesy to the nations. This **“false prophet”** also prophesies to the nations. But it preaches

a counterfeit 'gospel', a false religion. It's the first beast's 'missionary', its 'minister of propaganda', spewing out lies and deceit, deceiving the nations. It performs "great signs". It even makes "fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people". This imitates the "fire" that can pour from the mouth of God's people. This "fire" may symbolise the power that a false gospel can have on people's hearts and minds.

Jesus warned us, "false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). Paul warned the elders of the Ephesian church: "fierce wolves will come in among you . . . and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29–30). In part 2, we saw this kind of thing happening among the seven churches of Asia.

How do we tell false and true prophets apart? John tells us: "test the spirits to see whether they are from God . . . every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, . . ." (1 John 4:1–3). Signs and wonders, in themselves, prove nothing. The ultimate question is: who or what are people being drawn to worship? As we saw in our first part, the great question is: who will be Earth's lord and ruler? Who will people worship and serve?

- This "false prophet", the beast from the earth, makes people "worship the first beast"—that's any anti-Christian power that asserts itself against God and His people.
- God's true people declare that people must worship God.

Christians in many countries are surrounded by idolatry and false religion, just like those believers John was writing to. Many, too, live in godless totalitarian states—think of North Korea and China. In the Western world, we live in a humanistic society that puts pressure on people to conform to its own values. And the Church worldwide is infiltrated, as it has been since virtually the very beginning, by false teaching.

But notice the word "allowed" (13:14,15). God Himself *allows* this false prophet to do its work—just as He allows the first beast to do *its* evil work. *God Himself* is in complete control.

So Satan unleashes these two beasts—its false 'christ' and its false prophet. These are two henchmen that Satan uses to "to make war on the rest of" the woman's "offspring" (12:17). They're the two weapons by which Satan tries to bring the world to worship him.

The mark of the beast (13:16-18)

The beast from the earth causes everyone "to be marked on the right hand or the forehead" with "the name of the beast or the number of its name" (13:16-17).

In 7:2-8, we saw 144,000 sealed "with the seal of the living God" on "their foreheads". They're sealed with the Holy Spirit. God seals His people to identify them as His and to protect them. Now we see another group of people marked by the *counterfeit* of the Holy Spirit, the beast from the earth. Those with this mark are citizens of Satan's kingdom. They own allegiance to Satan, not to God. Just as the seal of God isn't a physical mark, such as a tattoo or electronic tag, neither is the beast's mark. The mark is *a symbol of ownership and control*. Those who are marked belong to Satan and are under his domination.

Nobody "can buy or sell" unless they have this mark. That doesn't mean (at least primarily) that God's people won't be able to have things like credit cards or bank accounts. It means that they won't be able to share fully in this world's wealth. And that's been true—to a greater or lesser degree—for many of God's faithful people through the ages.

In John's day, as we've seen, idolatry—worship of the Emperor and of pagan gods—was part of the fabric of society. Christian tradespeople—along with all believers—faced pressure to turn a blind eye or even participate in idolatry. They doubtless also faced pressure—as Christians often do today—to engage in shady business practices. At every turn, there was pressure to compromise. Those who refused to do so faced social ostracism and loss of goodwill. All this would make it much more difficult to earn a decent living.

They also faced punishment by the authorities—fines, confiscation of possessions and homes, imprisonment, exile or even execution. They faced the possibility of looting and destruction of homes and business premises by mobs. All this meant that life could be economically very hard for faithful believers.

This was doubtless true of the faithful church in Smyrna (2:9). They were materially poor but spiritually rich. In complete contrast, the church in Laodicea was materially rich, but spiritually bankrupt. They were affluent, very probably because they'd compromised with the world around them.

However, it's important to note that affluence isn't—in *itself*—the problem. It's how you get that wealth, how that wealth impacts your walk with God, and what you do with your wealth that counts.

This mark is “the name of the beast” (that is, the first beast, the beast from the sea) “or the number of its name”. Those who have “insight” (NIV) may “calculate the number of the beast”. We’re given a clue: “it is the number of a man, and his number is 666” (13:18). Who is this “man”? Is he an individual man? Many people think so. Through history, a profusion of names have been put forward. The most plausible is the Emperor Nero (reigned 54-68AD), an infamous persecutor of Christians. So how do people arrive at *his* name? The Romans, Greeks and Hebrews didn’t have special characters for numbers, as we do. Instead, they used letters. For example, the Romans used ‘I’ for ‘one’, ‘V’ for ‘5’, ‘X’ for ‘10’, and so on.

We can arrive at Nero’s name by converting his name in Greek (*Nerōn Kaisar*) into Hebrew letters, then adding the numbers represented by those Hebrew letters. This gives 666. To us, this looks like the sort of thing that codebreakers might do! But since, in those days, letters were also used for numbers, this procedure was widely used. For example, in the ruins of Pompeii, graffiti was found which reads (in Greek) “I love her whose number is 545”.^[1] The Greek letters of her name, when used as numbers, added up to 545.

The problem is this: if you know the name, you can easily calculate the number. But if you know only the number, you can (with a bit of ingenuity) calculate many different names! That poses a problem. Which name do you choose?

All this suggests that this isn’t the way (or at least the main way) to understand the number ‘666’. As we’ve seen, numbers in Revelation are symbolic. So what does 666 symbolise? Here are three clues which lead us to a likely solution:

- Firstly, it may well symbolise *failure*. We saw that ‘seven’ symbolises completeness and perfection; it may especially symbolise God’s complete and perfect activity in the Universe—creating, judging, saving and restoring. ‘Six’, being one short of ‘seven’, can symbolise incompleteness or imperfection, a falling short. The number ‘666’ is a *threefold* six. So

this number very likely symbolises *incompleteness, imperfect accomplishment, failure*. The threefold repetition of ‘6’ may perhaps emphasise that failure—in other words, *failure upon failure upon failure*.

- Secondly, it may well also symbolise *mankind*. The number ‘6’ can also represent mankind, who were created on the sixth day. And the number of the beast seems to corroborate this. It’s “the number of a man” (13:18). The Greek word translated “man” here can also be translated ‘person’ or ‘mankind’. So it’s not necessarily an individual man; it may well be all mankind corporately. And the threefold repetition may well allude to the Triune God, whose number is ‘three’. So ‘666’ may well symbolise *sinful mankind’s blasphemous attempt to be like God*.

Putting these suggestions together, we arrive at a very plausible solution. The number ‘666’ may well symbolise *mankind trying to be like God and failing catastrophically and completely*.

And this takes us back to the day when mankind first sinned. The snake tempted Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It tempted Eve to think that she could “be like God”. She, and Adam, yielded to that temptation. And so the desire to be like God was sown into the human heart. As mankind spread across the Earth, and as civilisation became ever more sophisticated, that demonic ambition grew ever greater. Satan inspires mankind, time and again, to build economic, ideological, cultural and political systems in rebellion against God. And that’s confirmed by the fact that this mark is “the name of the beast” (13:17). As we’ve seen, this beast (the first beast) seems to picture every anti-Christian government or power that opposes God and His people.

Here is sinful mankind trying to be like God and do what God does—create a global paradise on Earth. But mankind *always* falls short of perfection—totally and spectacularly. Only God can bring about a paradise on Earth—the wonderful paradise we see in Revelation’s closing scene.



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A scene from the Battle of Stalingrad, February 1943. Sinful mankind tries to create a global paradise on Earth. But mankind *always* falls short of perfection—totally and spectacularly. Only God can bring about a paradise on Earth.

The Followers of the Lamb (14:1-5)

We leave the foul and sinister atmosphere of the two beasts. Suddenly we find ourselves in the pure, clear air of God's holy mountain, "Mount Zion".

Zion was the location of the Jebusite stronghold that King David captured and made his capital—called the city of David, or Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-9). Later, the mount where Solomon built the Temple (Mount Moriah), became known as Mount Zion. The name Zion also became used for the whole city of Jerusalem.

But Zion also took on a broader, symbolic, spiritual significance. Mount Zion was God's "holy mountain" (Psalm 48:1-3, Joel 3:17, Zechariah 8:3). It was God's dwelling place (for example Psalm 132:13-14 and Isaiah 8:18), from where He ruled (Psalm 9:11).

God appointed Zion to be the seat of His King, the Messiah: "I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill" (Psalm 2:6). Now, in 14:1, we see the ultimate fulfilment of this. On Mount Zion, John sees "the Lamb", King Jesus the Messiah.

And Zion came to symbolise the place where God would gather His people to Himself (Isaiah 2:2-3, Micah 4:1-2). Now, here, in 14:1, we see these prophecies fulfilled. With the Lamb are God's people: "144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads". We've met these '144,000' in 7:2-8. They picture *the complete number of God's faithful people* in both the Old and New Testament periods. They're "the servants of . . . God", sealed "on their foreheads" with "the seal of the living God" (7:2-3). Now we see that they have the Lamb's name and the Father's name written on their foreheads.

God's people are sealed with "the seal of the living God". Satan's followers are marked with 'the mark of the beast' (13:16-18). God's people bear names: the names of the Lamb and the Father. Satan's followers bear a name: "the name of the beast or the number of its name" (13:17). Every person is sealed; everyone bears a name. But *which* seal will they be marked with? *Which* name will they bear? Will they belong to God or to Satan? Will they worship the Lamb or the beast?

"Mount Zion" here in 14:1 is New Jerusalem, which we see "coming down out of heaven from God" in the final vision of the book. This is where God will dwell with His people in the new creation (21:2-3). But 14:1 seems to be a vision of the present! In one sense, we're *already* on Mount Zion with Jesus! The writer to the Hebrews tells us: "you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,

and to God, the judge of all . . . and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, . . ." (Hebrews 12:22-24).

John hears "a voice from heaven", more glorious and majestic and beautiful than anything heard on Earth. It's a heavenly choir; they sing a "a new song" before the throne, the living creatures and the elders (14:3). We've heard a 'new song' before: the living creatures and the elders sang "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). That song is most probably the same as the one we now hear. Who is singing? Probably the '144,000'. They've been "redeemed from the earth" (14:3)—only people who've experienced the joy of redemption can learn this song.

Now John tells us more about the '144,000'.

► They "have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins". Why are the redeemed now described as virgins (in fact, virgin males)? Because, it seems, it emphasises both *purity* and *single-minded devotion*.

- Firstly, in part 4, we saw that the '144,000' symbolises God's people as an *army* (see also 19:14). God commanded Israelite warriors to be sexually pure during military campaigns (Deuteronomy 23:9-11). So picturing God's army as virgin males seems to symbolise *spiritual purity during battle*.

- Secondly, it symbolises *single-minded devotion to God*. God's people are pictured as pure virgins elsewhere in the Bible. God commanded His people, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Worshipping other gods is spiritual adultery. When Israel sinned, God called her a prostitute (Jeremiah 3:6, Hosea 2:5). And, (as we saw in part 2) "sexual immorality" in Revelation refers primarily to idolatry. The true Church is the virgin bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7, 21:2, and compare 2 Corinthians 11:2).

► They "follow the Lamb wherever he goes". To follow Jesus is to be His disciple, and to refuse to follow others. Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). This reinforces the call to *single-minded devotion*.

► They're "redeemed from mankind". When God redeems people, they become *His*. Paul writes, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, see also 1 Corinthians 7:23).

We belong to God. And so we're to keep ourselves pure, and devote ourselves to Him.

- ▶ They're redeemed from mankind "as firstfruits for God and the Lamb". The first of the agricultural produce (called the 'firstfruits') was offered to God (for example, Exodus 23.19). It was His portion.
 - The '144,000' are God's portion; they belong to Him.
 - And the Church is the 'firstfruits' of the new creation that we see in 21:1-22:5. Paul tells us: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). We believers are new creations. The rest of God's creation will be

renewed when Jesus returns: "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

- ▶ In their mouth "no lie was found". God's people are to refute Satan's lies, and counterattack with *truth*.
- ▶ Finally, "they are blameless". The Old Testament sacrifices had to be "without blemish" (for example, Exodus 12:5, 29:1). There's a link here, too, to our being the virgin bride of Christ. We shall be presented to Jesus, our Bridegroom, "as a radiant church, . . . holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:27 NIV).

The Eternal Gospel (14:6-13)



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John sees three angels, each with a vital message for this world.

The message of the first angel

John sees another flying angel "with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth . . ." (14:6). he angel cries out "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him" (14:7). This seems to represent the Church's proclamation of the gospel from the Day of Pentecost to the day when Jesus returns.

In the end, "every knee" will "bow . . . and every tongue . . . confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). All, without exception, will acknowledge Christ as Lord—some willingly and joyfully; others compelled to do so. So is this "eternal gospel" simply a call to fear God and glorify Him, whether willingly or not? Or is it the offer of salvation to those who repent?

In 11:3, we heard a divine voice declaring, "I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy". God authorised His people to proclaim the gospel to the

nations. What was the outcome? 'Seven thousand' were killed in an earthquake, but "the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven" (11:13). Surely this was true repentance and conversion. And likewise, surely, this angel's proclamation will also not go unheeded. Judgment is coming. And our gracious God is sending out an urgent call to repent and receive His offer of salvation through Jesus Christ.

The message of the second angel

A second angel cries "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality" (14:8). Babylon has not yet fallen. Yet so certain is her fall, that the angel declares it to have already happened! We've seen earlier that Babylon represents human civilisation under Satan's domination and in rebellion against God. Now here, for the first time in the book, Babylon is named. Later, we see her pictured as a gaudy prostitute (17:1-6). In 17:16-17 we see her overthrown; 18:1-19:3 is the "funeral dirge".^[2]

The message of the third angel

A third angel cries out **"If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath . . ."** (14:9-10). He's warning unrepentant sinners of what awaits them. They decided to follow the beast, so they will share its fate, and the fate of the false prophet. In His great mercy, God is sending a warning. He wants the unrepentant to heed it, to repent, and avoid disaster before it's too late.

We read that those who worship the beast and its image and receive its mark **"will be tormented . . . in the presence of the holy angels and . . . of the Lamb** (14:10). What does this mean? The clue may lie in what we read in 6:15-17. There we saw unbelievers fleeing **"from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb"**—recalling Adam and Eve's reaction to God's approach (Genesis 3:8). Paul writes, **"those who do not know God, and . . . who do not obey the gospel"** will be punished **"with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power"** (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 NKJV).

On the great day of judgment, people will either fall at His feet in adoration, or they will flee the burning purity of His presence. For believers, the presence of the Lord is their everlasting delight and joy. For the unrepentant, God's holy presence will be torment. What we read in 14:10-11 suggests that, for the unrepentant, **"the presence of the holy angels and . . . of the Lamb"** brings burning agony that endures **"forever and ever"**. They'll try to flee His presence, to escape His wrath. But they can't. Nowhere in the Universe is God absent. And so we must conclude that God is present even in Hell. The wicked are, of course, forever excluded from *fellowship* with God. But they will for ever be exposed to the fiery torment of His righteous wrath.

Such is the deceitfulness of Satan. Through his minions, the sea beast and the false prophet, he seduced people to **"enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin"** (Hebrews 11:25). Their reward—a reward that Satan knew full well awaited them—is eternal torment.

The call to faithfulness (14:12-13)

We read, **"This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus"** (14:12 NIV). This again picks up the theme of **"patient endurance"** (1:9, 2:2, 19, 3:10, 13:10 NIV)—a theme we discussed in part 1. As we said there, all of Revelation **"can be seen as one great call to faithfulness even to the point of death . . ."**^[3]

Our patient endurance will be rewarded; a voice from heaven (probably God's voice) tells John: **"Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on"** (14:13). So wonderful is this promise, so vital for us to keep in mind, that John is specially commanded to write it down. And, as if to further underline how vital it is, the Spirit Himself speaks (one of only two occasions where we hear Him speaking directly in Revelation). He declares, **"Blessed indeed, . . . that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!"** (14:13). Their **"labours"** means not only their good works, but faithfulness to Jesus in the face of persecution and temptation to compromise. Their **"deeds"** recall what Jesus wrote to the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna (2:2, 2:19). They included **"love and faith and service and patient endurance"** (2:19).

We believers have passed from death to life (John 5:24). Our names are written in the Book of Life (see Revelation 13:8, 20:15, 21:27). Yet we'll also be judged by what we've done; the deeds of faithful believers **"follow them"** (14:13). Paul writes: **"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain."** (1 Corinthians 15:58).^{[4][5]} God will reward every believer. That reward is to live for ever in His presence in the new creation. We shall see God's face (Revelation 22:4). And we'll reign with Christ for ever and ever (see 2 Timothy 2:12 and Revelation 22:5). But there are also rewards for how we believers have lived. Paul writes, **"For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."** (2 Corinthians 5:10). We'll look at this in the next part.

The Harvest and Vintage of the Earth (14:14-20)

The three angels have done their work. The gospel is preached; Babylon's fall is announced; those who worship the beast know they face God's judgment. And so Earth's harvest is ripe. The time for reaping has come.

John sees **"a white cloud"** (14:14)—the cloud is a sign of God's coming and authority. Seated on it is Jesus Christ,

"one like a son of man" (14:14, echoing 1:13 and also Daniel 7:13-14). He wears **"a golden crown"**. King Jesus comes to judge the Earth.

Jesus holds **"a sharp sickle"** (14:14). An angel emerges from the **"temple"**—from God's presence. And so he has God's authority. He calls out to Jesus to reap, **"for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe"** (14:15). So He swings



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An angel calls out to Jesus to reap, "for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe" (14:15). So He swings "his sickle" and reaps the Earth (14:16). This seems to be a grain harvest—almost certainly the harvest of believers.

"his sickle" and reaps the Earth (14:16). This seems to be a grain harvest. It's almost certainly the harvest of believers, not of the unrepentant. Jesus gathers His people into His presence in heaven (compare Matthew 13:30b). Paul writes, "the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, . . . And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). What a wonderful day that will be!

Another angel emerges from the temple. He, too holds "a sharp sickle" (14:17). Then a third angel comes "out from the altar" (14:18). He calls to the second angel: "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe" (14:18). Now, those who have resisted God to the very end, and remain unrepentant, are harvested. The angel gathers the grapes, and throws them "into the great winepress of the wrath of God" (14:19), which "was trodden outside the city" (14:20)—that is, outside the holy city of God—the city we see in 21:2-22:5 (and see 22:15). An ancient winepress had two vats. The grapes were thrown into one of these; people then trampled on them to extract the juice. The juice then flowed into another vat for collection.

Who is treading the grapes? We're told in chapter 19. The One who "will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" is "The Word of God", "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:13,15-16). It is Jesus Christ.

What flows out of the winepress isn't wine; it's "blood . . . as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia" (14:20). This imagery echoes Isaiah 63:3 and Joel 3:13. The number "1,600" is symbolic. It's 'four' squared, multiplied by 'ten' squared. As we've seen, 'four' is the number of the creation. For example, in 7:1 we read about "the four corners of the earth"—symbolising the whole Earth. And 'ten' and its multiples (for example '100') are 'round numbers', suggesting a complete

number whose total only God knows. God's judgment and punishment of the wicked is *worldwide* and *complete*.

It's sobering to remember that we *all* deserve that fate—to be trodden in the "winepress" of God's wrath. But *Jesus Himself* has been trodden in the winepress of God's wrath. He endured this on behalf of all those who repent and take Him as their Lord and Saviour. As one writer puts it, His blood "flows deep and wide to the farthest reaches of the world".^[6] *Whoever desires salvation* may avail themselves of the benefits of His sacrificial death—life in the presence of God for ever. But those who refuse His salvation must *themselves* be trodden in the winepress of God's wrath.

This is the great question that every person faces: will they be 'grain' or 'grapes'? On the great day of judgment, will they be gathered into God's Kingdom and presence? Or will they be thrown into His winepress and trodden in His wrath? God's judgment never comes without



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Treading grapes at Avdat, Israel. The angel threw the grapes "into the great winepress of the wrath of God" (14:19), which "was trodden outside the city" (14:20).

warning. God warns people. The warnings of those three angels of 14:6-11 must be heeded. And (as we read in 14:12-13) this calls for God's people—who keep God's commandments and maintain their faith in Jesus—to patiently endure.

This angel of 14:18—the one who commands the angel with the sickle to gather the grapes for treading—recalls two scenes we saw in the last part:

- He comes **“out from the altar”**. This seems to be the altar under which were **“the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne”** (6:9). They cried out to God: **“how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”** (6:10). They were told **“to rest a little longer”** until the number of God's people **“who were to be killed”** was complete (6:11). Now God's suffering people have all been reaped. Now is the time to **“judge and avenge”** their **“blood”**.

The ungodly have shed the blood of God's people. Now *their* blood, figuratively, is shed in **“the great winepress of the wrath of God”**.

- And he **“has authority over the fire”**. That fire recalls 8:3-5. An angel **“. . . was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar . . . , and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God”** Then an angel hurls a censer with fire from the altar upon the Earth, unleashing a great tempest and earthquake. Here is Almighty God manifesting the power of His presence on Earth. His people have prayed. In response, God sends seven trumpet judgments. Now, it seems, God is again responding to those prayers, throwing the ungodly **“into the great winepress”** of His wrath (14:19).

Perfect justice has been served. God has answered the prayers of His people.

The Song of the Conquerors (15:2-4)

John sees **“seven angels with seven plagues”** emerge from God's heavenly sanctuary. They're given **“seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God”** (5:7).

But before they're given the bowls, John sees **“what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire”** (15:2). We've already met a sea like the one John sees here: it was **“as it were a sea of glass, like crystal”** in front of God's throne (4:6). The sea in 4:6 most likely symbolises God's sovereign authority that stills all the forces of evil and chaos. It may also depict God's awesome, transcendent holiness. But this sea here in 15:2 is **“mingled with fire”**. Fire can symbolise, among other things, God's wrath and judgment (for example, 8:5, 19:20). And that's what it seems to symbolise here—the judgment of God. We are seeing, it seems, a preview of the day of judgment—the day we see enacted in 20:11-15. God has harvested the Earth; He has gathered His people, and judged the unrepentant.

Beside the sea are God's people triumphant in heaven—**“those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name”** (15:2). Holding **“harps of God”**, they sing a wonderful hymn of praise to God. The conquerors sing **“the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb”** (15:3). This is probably better translated **“the song of Moses, . . . that is, the song of the Lamb”**. After God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, Moses and the nation sang for joy (Exodus 15:1-18). Now, it seems likely, we hear that song again, transformed into a song about the Lamb. This song alludes to a number of Old Testament passages praising God—for example, Jeremiah 10:7 and Psalm 86:9-10.

The song of Moses celebrated the exodus from Egypt. This song of the Lamb celebrates a new exodus, far greater than the first. This new exodus was inaugurated through Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension. It will be completed at His Second Coming, when all the forces of evil are judged, and all God's people are safely gathered into His presence in New Jerusalem.

- In the first exodus, God judged the Egyptians and defeated them. In the new exodus, Jesus judged Satan and defeated him.
- In the first exodus, God rescued His people from bondage in Egypt, and brought them into covenant relationship with Him (see Exodus 19:4). In the new exodus, Jesus rescues people from slavery to sin, and brings them into covenant relationship with God.
- In the first exodus, God's people passed through the wilderness to a new life with God in the Promised Land. In this new exodus, God's people pass through the wilderness of this present age (12:6, 14-16) to eternal life with God in a new Promised Land—New Jerusalem (21:1-3).

These believers in glory have passed safely through this new exodus. Recall that Jesus exhorted the seven congregations to ‘conquer’ (2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21). These believers in heaven *have* conquered! They've conquered **“the beast”**.

But didn't we read earlier about the beast killing God's people? Yes, we did. In 11:7 we read that when God's two witnesses—His faithful people—**“have finished their testimony”**, **“the beast”** from **“the Abyss will . . . kill them”**

(11:7 NIV). In 13:7, too, we read something similar: the beast **“was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them”**.

So what’s happened? God has brought about a *wonderful reversal*. The beast was allowed to conquer God’s people. Now God’s people have **“conquered the beast . . .”** (15:2). We’ve seen this reversal before: after only three and a half days, **“a breath of life from God”** entered God’s two witnesses (11:11). He raised them from the dead!

But *how* did God’s people, once defeated and killed, gain the victory? Revelation 12:11 gives us the answer: **“they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death”**. We explained this passage earlier. But notice this phrase: **“they loved not their lives even unto death”**. These believers have patiently endured all that the beast could visit upon them—even to death, when necessary. They’ve remained faithful to their Lord. They’ve refused to worship the beast and its image, or to receive its mark. Now, beside the fiery sea of glass, we see them victorious!

Was it worth patiently enduring? Was it worth resisting the pressure to compromise? Was it worth all the suffering, even death? Yes, and a thousand times yes! Just listen to this glorious song of praise that these conquerors sing! And notice that God’s triumphant people don’t sing about their own salvation; *they worship God*. The conflict described in Revelation is, at its heart, about *worship*. *Who will be worshipped and served here on Earth? Who will be Lord?* These believers acclaim God to be **“Lord God the Almighty”, “King of the nations”** (15:3). They sing, **“Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? . . . All nations will come and worship you”** (15:4).

“All nations will come and worship” the Lord. Recall what God promised Abraham: **“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”** (Genesis 12:3). God promised that Abraham’s descendants would be **“as the dust of the earth”** and as countless as the stars (Genesis 13:16, 15:5). *In Revelation, we see how God fulfils these promises:*

- By His blood, Jesus has **“ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation”** (5:9).
- The gospel reaches every nation. In 11:3 we saw God’s **“two witnesses”** prophesying to the nations. In 14:6, John sees an angel **“with an eternal gospel”**,

calling people to fear God, give Him glory and worship Him.

- And the preaching of the gospel bears much fruit. In 11:13 all except those killed in an earthquake **“gave glory to the God of heaven”**. As we said in part 4, surely what we see here is the fruit of the gospel—true repentance and conversion. In 7:9 we see a **“great multitude . . . from every nation . . .”** standing triumphant **“before the throne and before the Lamb”**. Finally, in 21:23–24 **“the nations”** will walk by the light of New Jerusalem. **“All nations”** will come and worship God (15:4).

Of course, **“all nations”** doesn’t include every individual; the destiny of sinners who refuse to repent is **“the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death”** (21:8). But our merciful and patient Lord does not wish **“that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”** (2 Peter 3:9). He provides every opportunity for people from every nation to repent and enter His kingdom.

With this glorious song of praise ringing in our ears, we’re taken back again in time. The **“sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven”** is opened (15:5). From the sanctuary come **“the seven angels with the seven plagues”** who are given **“seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God”** (15:6-7). We saw those judgments in the previous part.

Then, after these judgments, one of these seven angels says to John, **“Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute . . .”** (17:1). Now begins the final destruction—step by step—of all the forces of evil.

Footnotes

[1] This information is from *Revelation* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary), by Ian Paul, page 37. He writes, “In the ruins of Pompeii, it is possible to make out a graffito: ‘I love her whose number is 545.’ Presumably the person who was the object of affection here knew her own number, and so would have understood the message – but while it is easy to move from name to number, it is difficult to move in the other direction, which means that the lover’s secret was safe.”

[2] Quoted from Revelation (*Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*) by Joseph L. Mangina, page 204. Published by Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 2010.

[3] Quoted from *The Returning King: a Guide to the Book of Revelation*, by Vern Sheridan Poythress, page 44. Published by P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, in 2000. Published online at <https://frame-poythress.org/ebooks/the-returning-king/>, accessed on 14 July 2021.

[4] See *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text* by G.K. Beale, pages 768-769. Published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Cambridge, England, and Paternoster Press, Carlisle, England, in 1999.

[5] See *The Triumph of the Lamb: a Commentary on Revelation* by Dennis E. Johnson, pages 208-209. Published by P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, in 2001.

[6] Quoted from *The Book of Revelation: the Seen and the Unseen: Sermons by Bernard Bell 2001-2007*, page 104. Published by Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, Cupertino, California. Published online at <https://pbcc.org/learning/archived-teachings/series/> Accessed 12 April 2013.