

11. The eternal Gospel

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Date: 02 January 2011

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[0 : 00] Now, I wonder if you'd have your Bibles open, please, at Revelation chapter 14, and we'll have a moment of prayer. Lord God, we thank you, you have given us the Scriptures to lead us to Christ Jesus himself.

Sometimes they speak in a very clear and plain way. Other times the language is difficult, but we believe that in all of it, Christ is known.

And so I pray that as we consider this passage together, that you will graciously draw near to us. That you will open your word to our hearts and minds, and open our hearts and minds to your word.

In Jesus' name, Amen. I don't know how many of you have made New Year resolutions.

I stopped that long ago, because there are a few things more futile than New Year resolutions. You make them, and you break them, and you forget about them.

[1 : 18] And there are a few things more futile either than simply on the first Sunday morning of the year, giving some pep talk about things will get better, keep your pecker up, it won't be as bad as you imagine.

When we are looking into Scripture for help any time of the year, but especially the first Sunday of the year, we need to turn to the solid certainties of the Gospel.

Not to pious hopes, not to fantasy land, but what actually is the Gospel telling us about living in this world. And that's my subject this morning.

I'm calling this the Eternal Gospel. Taken from verse 9, Then I saw another angel flying with an Eternal Gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth.

The Eternal Gospel, which has always been valid, is valid now, and will shape our lives and see us safely into eternity. So, not only are we looking at Revelation 14 as part of this series, this seems to me a very good message for the first Sunday of a new year.

[2 : 32] Now, the place in the book. The book of Revelation comes to us as a series of visions, which John the old apostle saw on the island of Patmos. Exiled there, probably the last person alive on earth who had known the Lord Jesus Christ and his earthly ministry.

Probably some 60 years had gone, and in the 90s of the first century, John is exiled on the island of Patmos and the Aegean. He's given a number of visions, and these visions are dominated by the risen Christ who comes in the first book and says, I am the first and the last.

I have the keys of death and of the world to come. Now, that's the solid certainty. The one who comes to us in the gospel in this book of Revelation is the one who not only has the keys of death, but the keys of beyond death of the world to come.

And we're coming near the end of a long section in the book where a number of judgments are poured out on the earth. Judgments of the seals, the trumpets, and later on the bulls in chapter 16.

I suggest that these are a series of pictures of the whole time between the comings, God's judgments in the world, which foreshadow the final judgment.

[3 : 51] And there are a number of interludes there, and these interludes are asking the question, what is happening to God's people during this time, during the last days?

And in chapters 12 to 14, in many ways the heart of the book, the story of the gospel is told in the form of a great cosmic drama.

The child is born, and he's snatched up to the throne of God while the dragon tries to destroy him. Now, the Bible talks in many ways.

We've got, if you like, the prose of that in Matthew and Luke. The wonderful stories we've been looking at in the last few weeks of the birth of the child in Bethlehem, of the visit of the shepherds, the wise men, and so on.

All those wonderful stories. If you like, that's the prose. In this sense here, we've got the poetry. What was actually happening in the whole universe when this event took place?

[4 : 48] And in chapters 13, we are shown why it's so difficult to be a Christian, because the devil, the beast, and the false prophet, the beast of persecution, and the beast of propaganda, the beast of destruction, the beast of deception.

They are actually raging against God's people and making Christian living very, very difficult. Now we are changing gear. Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb.

So there are three movements in this chapter. First of all, there is a solid foundation, verses 1 to 5. Solid foundation.

The dragon and the beast disappear, rather like in a dreamlike sequence, and the Lamb fills the picture. Revelation is, in many ways, like a picture gallery, which you go through, this great picture gallery, and sometimes you get rooms which are different paintings of the same kind of scene or incident.

Or in more contemporary terms, you have a montage of pictures, say on your computer or something, that show different shots of the same picture. This is what's happening here.

[6 : 06] Literally, he says, I looked and see, there was the Lamb. It's not that the Lamb is there after the dragon and the beast and the false prophet have done their worst.

The Lamb is there already. This is a parallel reality. And notice, he's not standing on the shifting sand. The dragon, we are told, at the end of chapter 12, stood on the sand of the sea, a shifting foundation, whereas the Lamb stands on the solid foundation.

Zion, city of our God. The heavenly Zion. Zion, the place which God had prepared for his people. And of course, the earthly Zion in Psalms 46 and 48, which God rescued from his enemies.

And who is with him? A hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads. Now one of the things we've seen in Revelation, apocalyptic writing, is the use of symbolic numbers.

It's 144,000. Well, it's 12 times something, times something. I've never been any good at figures, but it's kind of square or something of 12. No doubt somebody will come and tell me I got it wrong afterwards.

[7 : 20] But it's the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles. In other words, all the people of God throughout the ages. So I want to suggest to you the 144,000, some of you will remember, we already met them in chapter 7, are not an elite group, it seems to me, not a special group.

These are all the people of God throughout all the centuries. And they're described in three ways. Who are they? First of all, they are described as, in verse 4, those who had not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.

Now, in medieval times, it was very common to regard this as an elite celibate group. But, we know very well that in scripture, both marriage and celibacy are, both marriage and singleness, are regarded as God-given.

So, this cannot be the case. It cannot be the case there's an elite group of people in heaven who have never had sexual relationships. That's impossible to, that's impossible to justify from the rest of scripture.

And why single out that particular, that particular aspect? Rather, it's drawing on the rich, biblical image of Israel. Israel is a virgin dedicated to the Lord, so Jeremiah and Amos tell us.

[8 : 47] And indeed, Paul says this as well. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, speaking to the people of God, I promised you, he says, to one husband, to Christ, that I may present you as a pure virgin to him.

You see, that's the point. This is God's people, loyal, totally loyal, totally committed to the Lord, the heavenly bridegroom, the heavenly lover.

And we're going to read later on about the marriage of the Lamb. They have not defiled themselves with women. Now, I want to suggest that in the context of the book, that means they haven't defiled themselves with a particular woman whom we're going to meet in chapter 17.

Just glance over the page and we'll look at this in a few weeks' time. Then, one of the seven angels who had the seven bulls came and said to me, come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality.

In other words, these are people who have not succumbed to Babylon to the anti-God spirit of the age. Now, of course, some commentators will say, well, it's plural.

[10 : 00] So, why are you identifying with one particular figure? As we'll see in that chapter, indeed, as we saw a few weeks ago when we looked at the beast, this particular figure is resurrected in every generation, in every age, takes a new form, but it's the same old seductress.

Indeed, this is going back to the book of Proverbs, the figure of folly there in that book. So, the people there, first of all, are God's faithful people, the bride of the Lamb.

They're also described as disciples, verse 4, it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. Now, that doesn't mean they're following him as he strolls around heaven. That means that their lives, their winding paths of their lives, have been lives of discipleship.

See how relevant all this is to today. Not just talking about something in the far future. This is talking about the character, the nature of God's people today. They belong wholly to the Lord.

They are disciples of the Lord, following him wherever they go. And they are firstfruits. These have been redeemed from mankind, verse 4, as firstfruits for God and for the Lamb.

[11 : 19] Now, that doesn't mean, if it refers to the whole church, as I'm suggesting it does, this is not a particular group who are the first of many. Rather, it is the whole people of God who have lived lives of sacrifice.

Romans 12, present your bodies a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable worship or your reasonable service.

They are blameless. That doesn't mean their earthly lives have been perfect. After all, this morning, as every morning, we confess our sins. It means that they have become blameless to another sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Lamb.

So, the solid foundation and the solid foundation is not only the foundation on which the Lamb himself stands, but is the foundation on which his people stand.

That's the first movement in the chapter. Now, secondly, in verses 6 to 13, we have a sure gospel. In other words, the foundation is developed and described, if you like, what is this solid foundation?

[12 : 33] What ultimately is Zion? the city of God, the people of God. It is a sure gospel. It's an eternal gospel, verse 6. Now, those of you were here a few weeks ago, remember that in chapter 11 and 12, we saw the total involvement of the angels in heaven with the work of the gospel.

Now, it is, of course, human beings who preach the gospel, who share the gospel with others, but we are shown the involvement of the angel hosts in the spreading of the gospel.

angel. And after all, when you think of it, it was the angel Gabriel who actually first proclaimed the gospel, wasn't it? The holy thing to be born of you will be called the Son of God.

He will reign on the throne of his father David. And what did the angel sing on the plains of Bethlehem? To you is born a saviour who is Christ the Lord.

You see, the involvement of angels. I've referred often to Billy Graham's useful little book written many years ago called God's Secret Agents. And that is what they are.

[13 : 40] But in apocalyptic writing, in Revelation, we are shown something of the activity of those secret agents who are normally invisible to us. Now, obviously, this gospel, if it's an eternal gospel, means it's been the same gospel from the beginning and will be to the end.

Many people say things like people in the Old Testament were saved by works. They were not saved by works. They were saved by faith. Look at Hebrews 11. By faith Abraham, by faith Moses, by faith Abel, by faith Noah, Enoch, and so on.

The particular pattern in which that faith was expressed was sacrifices and so on, but nevertheless it was by faith and the prophets continually condemn those who simply practice the letter but have no change of heart.

In other words, those who are practicing the right things without a change of heart. The main elements are spelled out here. What does it mean to follow the Lamb wherever he goes?

And there are three elements mentioned here. First of all, the eternal, the sure gospel, first of all, means the worship of God as creator. Verse 7, Fear God and give him glory.

[15 : 00] Worship him who made the heavenly earth, the sea, and the springs of water. Now we saw some weeks ago in Romans chapter 1 how the all failure follows from failure to worship God.

And that failure springs from the failure to acknowledge him as creator, as the center of the universe. You see, you see, when we talk about God as creator, that's just a theoretical idea.

That is a very practical idea. My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. That means, first of all, there is nothing in heaven and earth that can oppose him.

Paul says in Romans 8, nothing in all creation shall separate us from the love of God. It also means that nothing in my life doesn't matter to him. As when the pious Jew tumbled out of bed in the morning and says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord.

That meant there were no other lords. Not a lord for your work, not a lord for your leisure, not a lord for your holidays, not a lord for every day. There is one Lord and he made heaven and earth.

[16 : 10] That is the very heart of the eternal gospel. But secondly, he is the lord of history. Another great truth, verse 8, fallen as Babylon the Great. We will see that particularly in 17 to 18.

Very often, Revelation gives us little previews before it comes to the May. Rather like a trailer in a film. We show a trailer of a film that is about to come. We are given a little preview here. The judgment of the nations who disobey God.

God is the lord of history, therefore the nations are responsible. That is why in the Old Testament prophets, there is a message not just to Israel. Most of the prophets talk about the other nations, the surrounding nations, and say that the eternal God, because he made heaven and earth, all nations are responsible.

The imagery here is pretty terrifying. Verses 10 and 11. And it comes from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19.

That's the imagery here, fire and sulfur raining down from heaven. If you've read that passage, you'll remember that in that passage we have the important word, shall not the judge of all the earth do right.

[17 : 26] So we'll see in a moment or two this judgment is not arbitrary, it's fair judgment. So he is the creator, he is lord of history. And thirdly, and this is verses 12 and 13, he is the rewarder of the faithful.

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. Now that's why John himself was on the island of Patmos.

He tells us in chapter 1 he is on Patmos for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. The Lord is saying endure now because it will be worth it.

The worship of the beast looks very congenial. The worship of the world looks very flattering. But it will pass, it will disappear. As John says in his letter, after all, the world passes away and its desires for those who do the will of God abide forever.

Once again, you see that's the prose and here we have the poetry, the vivid picture. But also, verse 13, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

[18 : 42] Now, that doesn't mean that those who died in the Lord before that moment were not blessed. I want to suggest what it means is now that the decisive moments have happened, now that Christ has died and risen again, now that he is the conqueror of the devil, the blessing which was always true, was always real, has now been guaranteed.

There is no possibility of it not coming. Just as in Hebrews 11, we are told that the people of the Old Testament times had to wait for us who followed so that they may be made complete.

Not because we are better than they were, of course, but because we live after the decisive event, the sacrifice, the resurrection, the ascension. And their deeds follow them.

Once again, not salvation by works, but saying that their life was built on the solid foundation. You see, the solid foundation revealed in the sure gospel, that leads to the kind of life which lasts into eternity, which is not burnt up in the judgment.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3, talks about people's deeds being burnt up because they have not been godly deeds. They have not been deeds that have lasted into eternity.

[20 : 01] But I think the verse 13, like other verses in the New Testament, is also meant as a great encouragement. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.

This passage, when it was first read, and as it is read now, is read by many people who have lost loved ones who have gone to be with the Lord. Now, there's a kind of super spirituality which tells us that it doesn't really matter about meeting our loved ones again because meeting the Lord is the important thing.

Now, that is the kind of super spirituality which the Bible will have nothing to do with. Because remember, Paul, in 1 Thessalonians, says to the believers who have lost loved ones, grieve, of course you grieve, but don't grieve as those who have no hope, because when the Lord comes, you'll be reunited.

That is, of course, meeting Christ is the final blessedness. And also, part of that is the uniting of all God's people's loved ones who have gone before.

I think this verse is another such encouragement because obviously, these verses address, first of all, to people who were lost many of, not just through natural death, but through persecution.

[21 : 20] So, the sure gospel, God the Creator, God the Lord of history, because he's these things, he can guarantee that he's the rewarder of the faithful. He'll be able to carry it out because he is all those things.

So, we have a solid foundation. We have a sure gospel. And finally, in verses 14 to 20, that very grim passage, we have a solemn warning.

Now, this warning draws from the parable in Matthew 13. We sang the paraphrase of that parable some moments ago.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds are the parable of the wheat and the tares, as the older version calls it. And Jesus says, the harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are the angels.

See how angels are so involved in all the purposes of God, in blessing and in judgment. Imagery also comes from the great harvest which you get in Isaiah 63.

[22 : 27] It's a passage of great power and striking imagery. The harvest is the end of the age. It anticipates, as Revelation so often does, the final judgment, judgment of the great white throne, which we come to in chapter 20.

I think there are two things I want to ask here. Who is the judge? Now, of course, in one sense, we know who the judge is. But it's terribly important, actually, in Scripture to notice the particular names that the Lord Jesus Christ is given at any given time.

These names are not just given because the authors happen to like them. Then I looked, and behold, the white cloud, verse 14, and seated on the cloud one like the Son of Man, coming, of course, from the book of Daniel.

But when Jesus is called the Son of Man, that draws attention to the fact that he is the last Adam. Willie, some weeks ago, was talking about the contrast between Adam and Christ.

Adam in whom we fell, and Christ in whom we have redemption. This is the last Adam who is going to roll up the scroll of human history.

[23 : 41] He is the Lamb. Just as he opened the scroll of the judgment, he is the one who is going to judge, finally. If you like, this is the poetry, and in Acts 17 we have the prose.

God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has appointed. And who is the man whom he has appointed?

The last Adam. Who is the last Adam? The one who suffered God's judgment to shield us from it. The one who, to go back to earlier imagery, the one who took the flaming sword at the gates of Eden allowed himself to be pierced and killed by that to open the gate for all his brothers and sisters.

A significant little phrase in verse 20. The winepress was trodden outside the city. What else happened outside the city?

There is a green hill far away outside a city wall where the dear Lord was crucified who died to save us all. The death of the Lord Jesus Christ outside the city where he suffered the judgment of God.

[24 : 58] But we need not suffer that judgment where he stood in for us and took our place till on that cross as Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied and every sin on him was laid here in the death of Christ.

I stand. So who is the judge? Not some kind of arbitrary tyrant but the last Adam the son of man to whom is given judgment.

But what actually is judgment? What is John saying about judgment here? Now notice this is God's final word.

This is the phrase several times in the first of all in verse 15. An angel came out of the temple. Then another angel verse 17 came out of the temple.

In other words this is God's final word from his sanctuary to those who have rejected him. And it is a universal judgment.

[26 : 03] That seems to me to be the point of verse 20. The winepress was thrown away outside the city but the other part blood flowed from the winepress as high as a horse's bridle for 1600 stadia.

Once again this is an apocalyptic number and this of course is multiples of four in this case. In apocalyptic writing four is the number of the whole earth.

Remember going back to the very beginning of the Bible the river flowed out of Eden and divided into four rivers four other rivers. We still use the phrase the four corners of the earth.

It is a grim image of blood as high as a horse's bridle. Think of the oceans of blood though that have been shed throughout the history of the world.

Think of the murders the tortures the violence. Would we want a God who remained indifferent to that? this is the just repayment for what has happened on earth.

[27 : 14] You see when we think of judgment it is not an arbitrary tyrant handing out a sentence rather as we know from elsewhere in scripture particularly from Romans that it is God's underwriting of choice as people have already made.

Remember that terrible divine hands off in Romans 1. God gave them over. God gave them over. God gave them over. You get this suggested first of all in the story of the flood.

The first great judgment of God which is seen of course as a picture of the final judgment as well. We are told the whole earth was corrupt and therefore God said I will destroy it.

Now in Hebrew the verbs corrupt and destroy are part of the same verb. You see what Moses is saying. God is saying the whole earth has self destructed so I will destroy it.

It's an underwriting of verdict which people already have made on themselves. This is what happens at the end of the last battle.

[28 : 28] I suppose you're expecting something from Narnia. Here it is. At the end of Narnia Aslan and his friends gather and the creatures who had refused to accept Aslan this is what Lewis says the creatures came rushing on their eyes brighter and brighter as they came right up to Aslan one or other of two things happened to each of them.

They all looked straight in his face. I don't think they had any choice about that. And when some looked the expressions of their faces changed terribly.

It was fear but it was also hatred. And all the creatures who could Aslan in that way swerved to their right and disappeared into the huge black shadow which streamed away to the left of the doorway.

But the others looked in the face of Aslan and loved him although they were very afraid at the same time. You see what Lewis is saying.

On the day when judgment comes and everyone stands before the Lord all will look at him with fear. Some will look at him with fear and hatred and rejection.

[29 : 52] Others will look with fear but with love. That really is the point of terrible passages like this. This is the underwriting the pronouncing of a irreversible verdict which people have as Aslan says elsewhere in this chapter they refused to leave their prison.

The door was locked on the inside. As we read this the words of Hebrews really come into mind how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation.

If we neglect the solid foundation the sure gospel and the solemn warning. God has provided a way back to himself.

That door is still open. Another year has dawned in which the glorious gospel can still be proclaimed. Let's praise God for his goodness and for his love.

Not one promise has been. Let's pray. Lord these are awesome pictures and yet you have preserved them in your word for us so that we might flee from the wrath that is to come.

[31 : 21] We might shelter in the rock of ages that we might indeed put our hand in the hand of the Lord the Lord of the years the Lord of creation and be led safely following him wherever he goes until we arrive at the destination which he has prepared for us and for all who love him.

Amen.