

12. The one song of the one people of God

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Revelation 15, on page 1036, and let's have a moment of prayer.

God our Father, we pray that the gracious Holy Spirit, who inspired these great words that we have read, and who inspired the Apostle John to write this entire book to help us in our Christian pilgrimage, we pray that that same Holy Spirit now will take these words and use them and lead us to Christ Jesus, the living Word himself, in whose name we pray. Amen.

The poet William Blake once said, Now, in one sense, of course, when the sun rises, that is exactly what you see, a golden disc, like a golden coin.

But in another and deeper sense, heaven and earth, praising the glory of the one who created them. And John, throughout his letter, and not least in this chapter, is drawing aside the veil, drawing aside the veil of what happens in earth, what is happening in heaven, and showing us the reality here in this great chapter.

And that leads us right into what he says at the very beginning, in chapter 15, verse 1. Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing.

[1 : 5 1] That shows we are coming to the end of the section that began in chapter 12, where a great and wonderful sign appeared in heaven. And we looked at that chapter some weeks ago, in fact, shortly before Christmas.

We saw this was actually John's telling of what happened when Jesus Christ was born. When the Virgin Mary gave birth to the child who was attacked by the dragon, and then caught up to heaven in the ascension.

And now, towards the end of this section, we have another great and amazing sign in heaven. That reminds us that what is happening on earth is in fact controlled in heaven.

That phrase, another sign in heaven, is hugely significant. Events on earth are controlled from above. So we have an interlude here of victory and praise.

The judgments, the third of the judgments, and the worst and the most intense of the judgments, the judgments of the bulls, and we'll look at these next Sunday evening, are about to be poured out on earth.

[3 : 0 1] But here we have an interlude which is telling us what is happening in heaven. In other words, what is happening behind the veil in the unseen world? What is the reality of these great events?

That's why I'm calling this chapter the one song of the one people of God. Now that's terribly important. This passage does not give us two songs.

It gives us one song. There are a few passages in the Bible that show more clearly the unity of God's people across the centuries and across the world.

The unity of the Old and the New Testaments, and the unity of God's people throughout the ages. There are those who wish to interpret the book of Revelation and draw a radical distinction between God's earthly people, the Jews, and God's heavenly people, the Christians.

That is totally unwarranted from the text of the book. One people of God stand before the throne of God and before the Lamb, and they sing the one song of the one people.

[4 : 05] It's a short, but it's a significant passage. So let's look at it. Let's look at it then. First of all, let's look at the singers in verses 1 and 2.

Particularly verse 2, The number of questions arise.

Who are these singers? Who is it who stands beside the sea of glass, mingled with fire, and sings the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb?

Now, some commentators suggest this is a special group of people, perhaps the martyrs. And of course, we very rightly prayed for martyrs and for the persecuted church this morning.

And we pray regularly for such people in our prayer meetings, and we do so rightfully. I want us to look very carefully, though, at this. Because I want to suggest this is not an elite group of people at all.

[5 : 15] I want to suggest this is the whole people of God throughout the ages. What is said about them? They had conquered the beast and its image, and the number of its name.

Now, some of you will remember, at least in chapter 13, the devil summons not one beast, but two beasts. One beast rises out of the sea, the beast of destruction, the beast of persecution.

The other beast which rises out of the earth is the beast of propaganda and false teaching. And I want to suggest to you that the people standing before the Lamb here, beside the sea of glass mingled with fire, are those who have conquered not simply the beast of destruction, but those who have conquered the beast of deceit and propaganda.

You see, sometimes it's two beasts, sometimes it's one beast, but they're all really activities of the devil. And we also prayed this morning, did we not, that we in our land, in our church, would stand against this second beast.

If you read chapter 13, you'll find this beast looked like a lamb, but spoke like a dragon. In other words, it looked genuine, it looked decent, but it spoke with his master's voice.

[6 : 38] It spoke deceit and lies and propaganda. When we stand before the Lord, the Lord is not going to say to us, you didn't stand up to persecution, did you?

If we haven't lived in a time and in a place where such persecution happens, what the Lord is going to ask us is, have we been faithful to him in the place he's put us?

Now, for most of the last 200 years or so, there has been virtually no physical persecution in our land or in the West. But the second beast, the beast of deception, has been working furiously and actively.

And we, in our time, in our land, have to stand against that beast. We have to conquer that beast. And its image, if you're back in chapter 13, the people worship the image, worship the beast.

In other words, worshipping someone other than the Lord himself. And are we worshipping someone other than the Lord himself? That's the question we need to ask.

[7 : 45] And the number of its name, 666. Now, I suggested then that wasn't the number of a particular man, a particular individual, but rather the number 666, which is less than God.

Simply, in other words, worshipping humanity, exalted to the throne of God. So you see, brothers and sisters, this is a passage not just about martyrs whom we honour, whom we pray for.

This is a passage about all of us in our situation who also have to fight the beast and its image and the number of its name. So who are the singers? The singers are all the people of God.

The great multitude that no one could count before the throne of God and of the Lamb that we met in chapter 7. Second question is, where are they? The sea of glass mingled with fire.

Glass suggesting purity and holiness and fire suggesting judgment. Where are they standing, in other words? They are standing in the immediate presence of the God who is about to judge, but they are standing there safely because they are covered by the blood of the Lamb.

[8 : 58] They can stand in that day. Bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own, as Wesley sang. All the faithful of all the ages standing before the throne of God and beside the sea of glass mingled with fire.

The other question is, when is this happening? Now, clearly, it will be fulfilled only on the last day when all of God's people from all of the ages, including all those who have ever been, those who are alive now, and those who are still to come to Christ, all of those people gather together singing the song of victory, of gratitude, and of salvation.

But it is also true even now. As we sang our hymns a few moments ago, all hail the power of Jesus' name, we were joining in that song, were we not?

We were praising and the hymn we've just sung, Julie's hymn, bringing together so many of the phrases from the book of Revelation, we were already joining in that song.

We were catching an echo of the song that resounds in the immediate presence of God. It is so practical, isn't it? As I said last week, the people in heaven there are described as those who follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

[10 : 20] It doesn't mean strolling around heaven beside the Lamb, it means living a life of discipleship. So, who are those who have conquered the beast's image and the number of its name?

Those who love God, those who are committed to God, and those who praise God. That's the challenge of this passage. Do we love God? Are we committed to Him?

Do we praise Him? Not just with our words, but with our lives. But the singers, first of all, and then the song in verses 3 and 4.

The one song of the one people of God. Now, the Bible frequently breaks into song. Right from the beginning, there are little poems, little songs, where the prose of the Bible breaks into poetry.

And among other things, these are great models of how to praise God. These songs are God-centered, aren't they? And worship needs to be God-centered.

[11 : 20] Some of our songs are so me-centered, aren't they? Of course, it is right to sing songs that express our love for Christ, our devotion to Him. But some of them are so much involved in myself and my feelings.

One commentator says, many of our songs today suggest that the Bride of Christ spends a great deal of time admiring herself in the mirror. Now, that's not what the Bride of Christ is doing here in Revelation 15.

The Bride of Christ is singing, great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God, the Almighty, God-centered, rather than self-centered. Now, this song is doing two things, as all great songs do two things.

First of all, it's expressing facts that the Lord reigns. In the Old Testament, there were two great affirmations which ring through it.

Hear, O Israel, Yahweh your God is one God, the one God. And then the other phrase which rings through the Psalms, the Lord reigns. These are statements of fact, statements of reality.

[12 : 30] They're also statements of faith because it does not look at this moment as if God reigns. as if Christ is honoured and exalted. And so when we sing these great songs of the faith, we're not simply singing about realities which we are.

We are making a statement of faith, planting, as Luther said, planting Christ's banner in enemy territory. It said that Cromwell's, it said that when Cromwell's iron sights raised their sands, the cavaliers trembled.

I believe that when we sing of the triumph of Christ, the principalities and powers tremble because they know their doom is certain.

What's the subject of this song? The song of the Lamb. Oh, fair enough, we've already come across that. You are worthy back in chapter 5. You are worthy because you were slain and have redeemed us from God from every tribe, people, nation, and language.

But it doesn't just say the song of the Lamb. It says the song of Moses, the servant of God and the song of the Lamb. These are not two songs.

[13 : 42] These are one song. What are the redeemed in heaven singing? They are singing the great story of scripture. They are singing the wonderful deeds of God revealed to us in the word of God.

If you think the Old Testament isn't relevant, the Old Testament is still going to be relevant in heaven. They sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

These great truths which are eternally true, eternally valid, eternally powerful about God. And that's why they sing the song of Moses.

Said before, there is no authority in the Old Testament that sets aside or supersedes that of Moses. And there's nowhere more clearly than here. If you doubt the value of your Old Testament then come to this.

What will we be singing in heaven before the throne of God? We'll be singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. That's how important it is. One of the reasons incidentally why we find Revelation so difficult is not just because it is difficult but because there's so much Old Testament in it.

[14 : 54] We need to know our Old Testaments in order to understand this book. Hardly any quotations and yet every line, every phrase almost echoes something from the song of Moses.

Song of Moses of course the great song sung by the Red Sea. The Lord has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. Then going on who is like you O Yahweh among the gods glorious in holiness mighty in power and so on.

This in other words is the eternal gospel of chapter 14. Back in chapter 14 verse 6 that we looked at last week I saw another angel with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth.

What we preach in our evangelism in our teaching in our building up is in fact the song of heaven. This is the poetry which gathers it all together.

And you'll notice the structure of this there's the statement first of all about God great and amazing just and true then the rhetorical question who will not fear which itself is a whole challenge to the whole world and then reasons for praising God.

[16 : 11] So who is God as opposed to who is the beast? Well he is the almighty first of all well he's the covenant God the Lord the one who keeps his promises he's the almighty the one who will carry out what he promised.

Now as the book of as the book of Daniel says no one no one can stay his hand or say to him what have you done? What's so amazing about these about these words in Daniel is they are not spoken by Daniel himself they are spoken by Nebuchadnezzar who had been humbled by this by the almighty and who had come to see there was no one like him he is the sovereign he is king of the nation some of the versions say king of the ages the idea is much the same he is the one who works throughout history in the nations of the world how do we know that all nations tribes people and languages will stand here before the throne of God and before the lamb because he is the almighty and he is the king of the nations the one who will carry out what he promised he is holy no word is no word is in many ways more significant about God than this word holy this is the only word in the old testament used in a kind of triple triple sequence holy holy holy is the echo of hosts then repeated again in the book of revelation holy holy holy is the lord the almighty who was and is and is to come one before whom we tremble one before one whom one day everyone will tremble so he is to be worshipped because he is holy utterly different utterly unapproachable utterly untouchable in his majesty in his greatness all nations will come and worship you no get anticipations of this in Isaiah

Isaiah talks about the day when the nations will come to Zion the mountain of the Lord rising above the mountains of the earth it's also mentioned in Revelation 21 I'm going to be talking about this later but let me read you a few verses from Revelation 21 the city had no need of the sun or the moon to shine on it for the glory of God gives it its light and its lamp is the lamb by its light will the nations walk and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it his gates will never be shut by day there will be no night there they will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations the worship on earth and the worship in heaven will everything that is worthy of God will last into eternity or as Lewis puts it all that is good in the old Narnia will be drawn through the door into the world that is to come and his acts are revealed your righteous acts have been revealed and how have they been revealed they have been revealed in the song of Moses and of the lamb in the scriptures of the old and of the new testament so the song of heaven is already being sung on earth the worship of the church on earth is an anticipation and is an echo of the worship of the church in heaven not a lot of people write books about worship and give talks on worship they almost always ignore the book of Revelation which seems to me astonishing because it seems to me what the book of Revelation has to say about worship must be the most important thing for the church on earth to catch a glimpse of to be involved in even here on earth so we have the singers and we have the song but in a sense that's only the if you like the back cloth to the third point which is the sanctuary in verses 5 to 8 after this I looked and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues now the seven angels of the seven plagues the completeness of judgment we'll look at this next week but the sequence of three threefold judgments and seven judgments in each comprehensive nature of what's going to happen you notice that they come out of the sanctuary and the sanctuary is here called the tent of witness now that's referring to back to the book of Numbers in chapters 17 and 18 where we're told that the Ark of the Covenant contained the tablets of the law the very heart of the teaching of Moses in the Pentateuch in other words this judgment is totally in line with God's revealed will these judgments are in total agreement with what God has said in his word what happens at the end will not be a total surprise because God has revealed this throughout his word and when you think of it the tablets of the Decalogue the Ten Commandments revealing the nature of God shows us that this judgment is going to be holy in line with the character of God the God who is holy the God who is righteous and the other imagery is taken from the Exodus story as well the angels are clothed in pure bright linen the kind of garment the high priest wore on the day of atonement and later on in chapter 19 we're going to find that the church the church is clothed in white linen which represents righteousness and gold represents royalty so you see what's being said here what kind of judgments are these these are the judgments which the king of the earth the one who created

heaven and earth the one who is the lord of heaven and earth the king of the ages and the king of the nations he will exercise just judgment he is the king he's not a tame line he is the king and he will exercise just judgment but he'll also execute righteous judgment represented by the linen after all the cross excuse me the cross is where love and justice meet the cross showing the depth of God's love for human sinners and the depth of God's hatred for human sin these judgments are going to be poured out on those who reject that one sacrifice once for all established so the judgments are coming from the sanctuary they're not simply coming from the throne they are coming from the sanctuary and the sanctuary is the place where God revealed himself and where his will is carried out if you notice this interesting phrase in verse 7 one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever now we met the four living creatures back in chapter 4

I suggested then that these living creatures round the throne represent the worship of the whole created order kind of idea you get in the Psalms frost and wind obeying his will stormy wind and so on these Psalms which tell us that in the great movements what we call nature and so on God is revealing his will and God's agents are praising him now it seems to me that one of the four living creatures giving the golden bowl of wrath is a poetic way of talking about what Paul talks about in Romans 8 of the whole creation groaning and longing for deliverance the whole creation is under a curse all creation is fallen one day it will be redeemed and that redemption will not come without the judgments of God it's very interesting in many of the Psalms when the judgment of God is mentioned it's greeted with rejoicing

[24 : 31] Psalm 98 for example praise the Lord the seas praise him the trees clapping their hands why? for he comes to judge the earth you see how throughout scripture in poetry in prose in vivid language sometimes in straightforward statement this consistent idea that the saviour is the judge they're not it's not two gods it's not two stories it's not two judgments the judgment comes from the one who is holy who is just who is true and the God of the covenant and it seems to me then that this suggests that creation is longing for that judgment which will set it free from its bondage to decay as Paul says in Romans 8 they are bowls full of the wrath of God now in chapter 5 verse 8 these bowls were filled with the prayers of the saints I want to suggest what John is saying here is that the prayers of the saints the prayers of God's people have a significant part to play in the overthrow of evil it seems to me that's something we need to be more conscious of than we are after all what do we mean when we pray your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven we expect that to be fulfilled it's not going to be fulfilled unless God's enemies are destroyed so you see how the whole picture is blending together and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power now the smoke represents the blazing presence of God

Isaiah in the temple the temple was filled with smoke now this of course is going to happen at the end of the age but it sometimes happens before that for example if we read the book of Amos chapters 7-9 Amos prays and intercedes for the Lord to spare his people at one point the Lord says no Amos the time has passed and judgment is coming you see there are the judgments in history before the judgment on history we'll look at that again next week in other words what happens at the end will not be a totally unparalleled and unprecedented event God's judgments are already active on earth and it is possible even on earth to pass the point of no return to so become hardened to so become rejecting of the whole message that God has nothing left for judgment so you see this is a powerful chapter it's both a chapter that brings together a great deal that's already in scripture but also presents it in this vivid and dramatic way it seems to me it's saying to us a number of things as we finish it's telling us to love the word of God because we will still be rejoicing in the truth of the song of Moses of the Lamb in heaven it tells us to believe in a God who is big enough to do all that he promised and that means judgment as well as mercy that's why the letter to the Hebrews says how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation

Amen let's pray who is like you O Lord just and true working wonders glorious in majesty mighty in power God our Father we pray that as we as we leave this place we will leave the place with the song of heaven bringing in our ears and in our hearts and giving us the strength to persevere whichever beast it may be that we have to face in our earthly lives because we believe in you the almighty who can carry out exactly what you promised and we praise you for this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ Amen