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REVELATION 14: 1 – 13

GOD WILL RESOLVE THE CONFLICT BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

In 2013 a gentleman with the name Ryan Bell, who used to be a pastor, was asked: “What difference does God make in your life?” He found answering that question harder than he had initially thought, and so he wanted to find out for himself. He decided to live for a year as an atheist, without God, starting January 1, 2014.

For a real Christian this is a silly experiment, of course. As if living with God is some sort of hobby that you can drop or pick up again, any time you feel like it. Today this is how many folks may look at religion. It is about your own spiritual needs.

But God exists. He really does, regardless whether Mr. Bell, you, I, or anyone else, believes it or not. And when you realize this, and that your relationship with him determines the very core of who you are, that your faith in Jesus is your very identity, you cannot even imagine keeping up for just one day pretending that he does not exist.

Nevertheless, the question, “what difference does God make in your life?” is a good one. Not because you can simply switch between living with or without God, as if that would determine God’s existence.

However, there is this distinction in our world between those who trust in God and those who ignore God. Or, to put it in the words we hear in Revelation 13 and 14, the distinction between those who follow the Lamb and those who follow the beast.

You will remember that Rev. 13 pictures antichristian violence by the mock-trinity of the dragon (Satan) and his two monsters. The frightening beast from the sea had numerous worshippers following him (see v.3 and 4), although not everybody joined the unholy parade.

The question now becomes, how is this conflict between good and evil, as pictured in Rev. 13, going to end, and how is the church going to survive this ordeal?

The view from above in John's vision in Rev. 14:1–13 shows that God himself will resolve this conflict. And what will be the outcome for you? That depends on what side you are in this conflict. Do you live with God or without God?

GOD IS A GOD OF GRACE

The first thing John sees, when the frightening vision of Rev. 13 disappears, is a joyful and pleasant surprise – the very opposite of the threatening picture in Rev. 13. He sees “*The Lamb, standing on Mount Zion*”.

We know that “the Lamb” is Jesus Christ. In Rev. 5, John saw him standing as a Lamb, “looking as if it had been slain”. He is the One who sacrificed himself, “the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.” But he also came to life again. He is the child from Rev. 12, “caught up to God and his throne”. And now when John sees him standing here, it is a victorious, triumphant image.

“Zion” is the old name of the mountain where the LORD had his temple built. Throughout the Old Testament it stands for the place where God is present, the place from where he governs his people. It was also the place where God's people came to worship.

And in the promises of the prophets, Zion becomes the place of refuge, the place where the redeemed will be gathered. In Zion God guarantees salvation and security for all who seek him and worship him.

Here, in Revelation, this 'Mount Zion' is more than a particular geographical location, like the earthly Zion. But it is not heaven either, or the New Jerusalem. We are not there yet. No, the name is symbolic, referring to every place in this world where God is worshipped by the followers of Jesus Christ, and where they are protected by his care. In a demonic world, Zion stands for the realm of safety for those who share in Jesus' victory.

And you know what is so wonderful? John sees that the believers "*with the Lamb on Zion are 144,000*". Do you remember those people? We have met them before, in Rev. 7. It is the same group, all the people of God. The vision shows the heavenly view of God's church on earth of all times and all places, the total number of God's people, with each one of them known, numbered, and marked by God himself.

Today this church is still a work in progress. And it still needs a lot of work. Yet, in the end they will all be there, the full number, safe and secure. But today already the risen Christ Jesus guarantees our safety. O, yes, the angry dragon will continue to attack you. But worship the Lamb, place yourself under his protection, and you will have nothing to fear.

How do we know this? Remember what we also heard in Rev. 7. The 144,000 were 'sealed' on their foreheads. Well, here we find out what this 'seal' looks like. "*They had the name of the Lamb and his Father's name written on their foreheads.*"

You can never hide what is on your forehead. It is your attitude in life that demonstrates to whom you belong. Let it be visible that you belong to God the Father and to Jesus Christ. They own you. But they also protect you. This mark tells you that nothing can separate you from God's love in Jesus Christ.

All this makes this glorious view of the Lamb with his 144,000 marked followers on Mount Zion a joyful surprise. The dragon and his two beasts will attack you and try to make you unfaithful to God and your Saviour. But in the fierce battle between good and evil, our God shows himself a God of grace.

Then John also hears something (v.2)! It is a sound from heaven, loud and lively. But he finds it hard to describe it adequately. Three times he says that it was “like this or like that.” First, he compares it with “*the roar of many waters,*” majestic and impressive, as when you stand close to Niagara Falls. He then compares it with “*the sound of loud thunder,*” powerful and overwhelming. But he concludes by comparing it with “*the sound of harpists, playing on their harps,*” melodious, sweet, lovely, a wonderful mix of impressions that move heart and soul.

But after a moment John recognizes the sound as singing. He hears heavenly voices. Marvellous! But, who are these mighty singers? Many scholars suggest that the 144,000 are singing. This is not very likely. They are still in the process of learning this song, it says in v.3. On top of that, this sound comes from heaven.

So, again, who are singing here? John hears (and perhaps sees) that this chorus is singing “*before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders*”. That picture brings us back into God’s heavenly throne-hall, described in Rev. 4 and 5. We should therefore think of the massive angel-choirs we read about in Rev. 5:11, “*numbering myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands*”. In a most glorious manner heaven responds to the gathering of the 144,000, God’s people, God’s holy church redeemed by the Lamb.

We do not hear what they are singing, but it is called “*a new song*”. In Scripture we always hear about ‘a new song’ when God’s people have reason to praise the Lord for new, powerful acts of salvation. In many of the psalms, Israel is called to ‘sing a new song’ to celebrate God’s new victories over his enemies.

Here the heavenly voices teach the church a new song to praise the God of grace, because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. It is incredible, but true, that in the midst of much antichristian oppression and hostility you do not have to hunker down in fear. No, you may join the angels and learn to celebrate your salvation from sin and from the evil powers of this world with a new song to the praise and glory of God.

And “*no one could learn that song except the 144,000, who had been redeemed from the earth,*” the apostle adds. Only if you belong to Jesus Christ

you will be able and learn to sing with all your heart to express your ‘new’ experience of God’s gracious redemption.

That is not exclusive in the sense that others are not allowed to participate. But if you do not believe in Jesus as your Saviour, you just do not get it and you do not care. For folks that do not experience the love of God and the joy of salvation by grace, it doesn’t make sense to join in singing about it. But for those 144,000, for the church of Jesus Christ in this world, it is the most natural thing to do. After all, as Christian believers we have seen God’s amazing power as a God of grace, have we not?

The apostle John then goes on to list five reasons why it should be easy for the church to learn this new song in praise to God for his goodness and grace.

The first is that the believers “*have been redeemed from the earth*”. The ‘earth’ is here the realm of sin. So, by his saving grace in Jesus, God has liberated us out of there, and set us free from the evil rule of Satan.

The second is that they “*have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins*”. For some that is a disturbing statement. It seems to imply that the redeemed are only single men, who abstain from sexual activity, and that women are excluded from salvation, because they are unclean. But that does not make any sense.

The point is that here, as more often in the Bible, sexual imagery is used to describe our spiritual commitment. Just as adultery is often a metaphor for idolatry, turning away from the true God to serve other gods, so ‘being virgins’, or ‘keeping pure’ (as translated in the NIV) becomes a metaphor for remaining faithful to the true living God, and rejecting the values and beliefs of the antichristian culture.

In other words, John uses this strong image to emphasize that as God’s church we can only learn to sing this new song of salvation, if we remain entirely, one hundred percent loyal and devoted to Jesus Christ as his pure bride.

The third reason that makes the church sing to the glory of God, is that we “*follow the Lamb wherever he goes*”. Think of the Israelites in the Old Testament. After they had left Egypt, they followed the cloud by day and the pillar

of fire by night, on the journey to the Promised Land. In the same way as God's children today we may follow Jesus Christ to the new Promised Land.

It is true, that this journey is filled with trials and struggles. We experience that the way of the Lamb is the way of the cross. And yet, this is also the way to glory. Jesus calls you to hold on to him and to follow him, without being afraid of the consequences in this life. Trust that with him your future looks bright. That will make you sing!

John's fourth point is that as Christian believers we have been "*redeemed from among mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb*". The symbolism of the 'firstfruits' presented to God is rooted in Old Testament harvest laws. By God's grace you have been separated from this sinful human world. "You have been bought with a price," says Paul to the Corinthians. You have been given a new purpose and a new destination, to serve and worship God and your Saviour.

And the fifth characteristic of God's children: "*in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless*". This is serious. In Rev. 21 and 22 we hear that "all liars" are barred from entering the New Jerusalem. So we must resist Satan's lies, hold on to the truth, become more and more Christ-like, and find ourselves "blameless" by grace alone.

Well, here is the profile of the church of Christ, as it is singing on its way to eternal glory. No, it is not a profile that reflects our achievements. It is a profile that only reflects the glorious power of God's grace in our lives.

Do you recognize this profile as your profile? Is this your church? Rejoice, because today already, as the Holy God is on his way to resolve the conflict between good and evil, today already we may live under the protection of God the Father and the Lamb. Today already we may sing with the angels the new song of the victory we have in Jesus. Because the Holy God is a God of grace!

GOD IS A GOD OF JUSTICE

If only the 144,000 followers of Jesus can learn to sing the new song of God's grace, because they belong to the Lamb, what about the future of the

rest of mankind? How will they be affected when the Holy God is going to resolve the conflict between good and evil that has plagued this world since the fall into sin? What will happen to the followers of the beast?

John's vision continues. The heavenly song fades out, and the scene changes. He then sees three angels flying in midair. That is in v.6, 8 and 9. They appear one after the other, but all three of them have the same purpose, namely, to warn the people of the coming final judgment that they may repent and turn to God in faith.

This flight high above the earth and these loud voices work together to heighten the dramatic tension in these verses. Everyone on earth must hear what these angels have to say, and no one who continues in unbelief is going to escape the consequences.

The first Angel "*has the eternal gospel to proclaim*". The gospel is always God's good news of salvation; the joyful message that God the Creator is the glorious King of the universe, and that through Christ he is going to establish his new world. And this gospel is "eternal", unchangeable, never outdated, and valid for ever.

But it is not only eternal, it is also universal. The gospel is for all "*those who dwell on earth*". Regardless of the time in history, culture, background, language or whatever, everyone, everywhere is called to fear, glorify and worship God the Creator.

This gospel message is also really urgent, because, says the angel, "*the hour of God's judgment has come*". There is no time to lose. Many in this world live as if there will never be any judgment at all. But everybody will one day come face to face with his Maker. And only the gospel of Jesus opens the way of escape. Return to God by faith in Jesus Christ before it is too late. Fear him. Worship him and not the beast. The Creator alone is worthy of all praise and worship.

What comes out of the mouth of this first angel, is nothing but the Christian missionary message of the church of all times. Is this our message in the world today? Is this our focus when we think about mission and evangelism, that all people are to worship and give glory to God the Creator? Are we addressing the chief sin of people that they refuse to worship the One who

created them and sustains them? Do we let people know that God is warning the unrepentant world?

This makes the gospel proclamation urgent and serious business. For if you choose not to repent in response to its message, God will punish sin!

As he resolves the conflict between good and evil, God also demonstrates his justice.

Then the second angel appears in John's vision, and he makes a remarkable announcement. "*Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great*". That is remarkable for two reasons.

In the first place, this is the first time we hear the name 'Babylon' so the reader or listener does not know anything about it. A detailed description comes in Rev. 17. Let me say now already that Babylon represents all the hostile threats against God's people of all times and places. It is the great anti-city to the New Jerusalem, and the centre of all false worship. It is the symbolic city of this world, the human culture and society where all anti-christian worldviews come together.

Secondly, we note that it says "fallen is Babylon" – that is the past tense as if it is already accomplished. But it has not happened yet. The destruction of Babylon is still to come. We will hear about it in Rev. 18. But it drives home that it is inevitably going to happen. Babylon will surely be destroyed, that's a guarantee!

And why is that? "*She made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.*" In the expression "sexual immorality" or "adultery" we have the flipside of the same sexual imagery as in v.4.

Just as "keeping pure" is a metaphor for being faithful to God, so "adultery" is a metaphor for idolatry, following Satan. And this kind of 'adultery' has an intoxicating influence on people. It leads to the destructive behaviour and lifestyle that is so rampant in our society. It offends God deeply.

And therefore, in stark contrast with Zion, the city of God, as a place of redemption, Babylon, the city of Satan, will become a place of utter destruction, because God is not only a God of grace, he is also a God of justice.

And then we hear the loud, booming voice of the third angel. It is so loud that no one can claim not to be aware of the dramatic consequences when you call Babylon your “home”. *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.* In other words: “if you refuse to repent from evil, if you refuse to turn to God, because you love to drink the intoxicating wine of Babylon, the God of justice will make you drink the wine of his anger, his wrath” (see Jeremiah 25:15-28).

If you are going to attach yourself to this evil world, you will perish with this world. You cannot stubbornly persist in sin and expect to get away with it.

Then the angel gives a graphic picture of the terrible suffering of those who follow Satan, and refuse to repent and worship God (v.10, 11). The fire, the burning sulphur and rising smoke are a grim reminder of God’s punishment for Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). But here it will go on for ever and ever, without relief, day and night.

What do we do with this horrendous picture? The idea of endless torment is abhorrent for us. It troubles not only non-Christians, who believe that everybody is innocent and that all suffering is senseless and morally wrong.

Even many Christians have a hard time with the reality of hell. Is God not a God of love? And does Jesus not teach us to love even our enemies? After all, they might repent and become our brothers and sisters in Christ!

On top of that, there are many decent people who may not believe in the Holy God and who may not follow Jesus, but who still do things that reflect the power and glory of God, things we respect, things we admire them for.

However, let us be careful not to distort the biblical truth. All these considerations are true and apply today. As long as we live together in this world, we reach out to unbelievers, we pray and hope for repentance of even the most terrible sinner.

But at Jesus’ second coming the possibility of repentance comes to an end. It is over. No second chance. Even Jesus himself says this. Read the Parable of the Weeds, and its explanation, in Matthew 13: 24–30 and 36–43.

That is radically different from today, when there is still time to repent. Then we will see undiluted wickedness; evil in all its ugliness. In wicked people, evil will then come to full fruition. Today it is hard for us to imagine how much worse evil may actually become. We begin to see glimpses of it today. That is awful.

Yet, for us today the reality of hell is beyond comprehension. But we must accept that God alone is God. He will resolve the conflict between good and evil. And he knows what he is doing when he displays grace and when he displays justice.

Today for you and me, and everyone else it is the most serious warning that only by turning to Jesus Christ we can escape the hellish agony. He is the One who drank the wine of God's wrath in our place.

This warning is especially urgent if you want to belong to Jesus and enjoy his blessings, and at the same time you enjoy living in Babylon, living according to the values and beliefs of a culture without God. This message urges you not to settle down in Babylon, but to reject such cultural and spiritual accommodation and to stay focussed on your trek to the New Jerusalem.

So, where do you want to belong: Zion OR Babylon?

GOD IS A GOD OF HOPE

Where does this leave us, today – *the saints* (v.12), the believers, *those who keep the commands of God and their faith in Jesus*? Should faithful Christians gloat over the horrible fate of those who worship the beast? Absolutely not.

It makes the call to reach out in compassion even more urgent. And we must also take the warning to heart, not to be impressed by the ways of the world. Do not be intoxicated by the beauty and grandeur of Babylon. Accommodation to a culture driven by Satan will always end in disaster.

But praise the Lord! The God of justice, the God of never-ending punishment is also a God of hope. As he is on his way to resolve the conflict between good and evil, he calls for your *endurance*, says John.

Yes, you will need “patient endurance”, because God does not promise that your trouble and oppression, your trials and temptations in this world are going away before Jesus returns.

You will need “patient endurance” to resist the tempting ways of Babylon and the beast. Keep God’s commands, remain faithful to Jesus Christ, and keep singing. Do not cave in to the attractions of the surrounding society and its immoral idolatries, however innocent and seductive they seem.

No, this is not always easy. In fact, it can be really difficult! But it is possible. Always remember that God is a God of justice AND hope. Do not give up. The ultimate vindication is coming when the conflict between good and evil will be resolved.

This hope is confirmed twice!

First by the exalted Christ! At the end of this vision John *hears a voice from heaven*. It does not specifically say who is talking, but it is probably Jesus himself, because he was the One who had instructed John in the same way in Rev. 1:11.

He tells John, “*write this*. What I am going to say now is so important that I explicitly want you to put it black-on-white for my people. Make sure that everyone at all times can read my words of encouragement for all my children, my words of hope in the midst of disasters and persecution, even to the point of death.”

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. The Holy God will resolve the conflict between good and evil. And this resolution will come with violent judgments and eternal punishment. But there is hope! For God’s children the end of life will be radically different from what it will be for the wicked, as pictured in v.9–11.

When you die in the Lord Jesus, you are blessed, you will be happy, regardless what your life here on earth was like. Our God is a God of hope beyond this earthly life. His grace will lift you out of this dark world, where so many horrible things happen, and usher you into glory.

When you die in the Lord Jesus, you will see, face to face, the One who died for you, and who now lives to intercede for you. You will see his glory as the One who conquered sin, death, and Satan.

Let these words of hope comfort us when we bury our dead. God's children die in this broken world, and many of them suffer on their way to the grave. But together with them we all look forward to the day that the conflict between good and evil will be resolved permanently. It is coming.

And then the Holy Spirit confirms it again: *YES*, he says, *blessed indeed* are those who belong to the Lord. For those who follow and worship the beast, there will be no rest, day or night (v.11), but when you die in the Lord Jesus, you will find the true rest that will never end.

All the trouble in this sinful world, ripped apart by the conflict between good and evil, you may leave it all behind. The Holy God will take care of that.

But whatever you do in this life to the glory of God, will follow you and stay with you forever as the eternal evidence of God's grace in your life.

You and I may be encouraged today that the Lord is faithful to the end.

May that truth encourage us to also remain faithful to him.

3. In verse 16 it says that *the earth came to the help of the woman*. How does God use the earth, his creation to protect or sustain his church?
4. When the dragon [Satan] cannot destroy the church, he turns to the believers individually and personally (verse 17): *those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus*. See also 1 Peter 5: 8, 9. How can we personally protect ourselves against those attacks of Satan?

Chapter 20 – Revelation 13

1. The beast from the sea represents the evil, antichristian political powers, inspired by Satan to resist God's authority and driven by the desire to destroy God's work and God's people. How does this square with the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 13:1-7?
2. Imagine that the efforts of the two beasts will be successful, in the sense that they will be able to create a world without war, without poverty and hunger, without racism and other social injustice. Would that make the church, faith in God and in Jesus Christ, as well as Christian living superfluous? If you think so, why? If not, why not?
3. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 and 1 John 4:1-6. How do these passages help us better understand Revelation 13?
4. The ultimate difference between Christians and non-Christians is a difference in worldview. What is a worldview and what makes a Christian worldview different from other worldviews? In the big picture of God's plan and providence, what was the purpose of the coming of Jesus Christ in the world? How does this affect your worldview? And how does your worldview affect you personally?

Chapter 21 – Revelation 14:1-13

1. In reference to the beginning of this chapter (the story of Ryan Bell), what difference does God make in your life?
2. The 144,000, mentioned in Rev. 14, are called (v.4) *redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb*. In the O.T. 'firstfruits' represent the whole harvest still to come (see Leviticus 23:9-14). Would this suggest that the 144,000 are only a fraction of the whole,

as Paul uses this expression in 1 Corinthians 15:20, where he calls Christ *the firstfruits of all the redeemed*? Would this imply that in the end all of mankind will be saved? Earlier (see Rev.7) we identified the 144,000 as all the redeemed. What is then here the meaning of the term ‘firstfruits’? Compare James 1:18

3. What does it tell you about the world we live in, when Revelation emphasizes the contrast between “those who follow the beast” (13:3) and “those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4)?
4. Could or should Rev. 14:7 be used as a theme for an evangelism or outreach campaign? Why or why not?

Chapter 22 – Revelation 14:14-20

1. The vision in this passage shows a separating harvest: the grain harvest leads to eternal joy, whereas the grape harvest leads to eternal wrath. What is the connection with Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:31-46? This triggers difficult questions. What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ as Saviour, to live faithfully and obediently as he calls us to do? See also James 1:27. Explain the term ‘social gospel’.
2. In Matthew 22:37-39 Jesus indicates that at the heart of Christian living is: loving God with all your heart, soul and mind, and next to this, loving your neighbour as yourself. What about all the people who do not believe in God and do not follow Jesus as Saviour, but who do live according to good Christian values (helping the poor and hungry, caring for refugees, homeless, victims of disasters, etc.). They may not love God, but they do love their neighbour. Can we emphasize the 2nd of these two commandments [love your neighbour] at the cost of the 1st one [love God]?
3. What is the task of the church? Changing the circumstances in people’s lives or giving people hope for the future? If you think it’s both, should one have priority over the other? If so, which one and why? How does Rev. 14:14-20 help you to answer this question?
4. How do we see God’s patience, God’s long-suffering in Rev. 14:14-20? Compare 2 Peter 3.