

# When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation

## Study Guide on Revelation 14-16—Week 9 (Sunday, Oct. 25)

**Background:** Our text is a little bit easier this week. The symbolic images are still very strange to our eyes and ears, but no significant new characters are introduced. Following the previous two chapters' terrifying depiction of the dragon and the two beasts, these chapters function to remind John's Christian readers that God's enemies will be defeated and that God's people must remain faithful.

It is imperative that the reader remember that John's first readers were being persecuted, some even dying, with the number expected to grow. Some Christians were resisting the strong pressure to worship the emperor, but others were giving in. These chapters seem to be addressed especially to this latter group who might avoid persecution but then pay for their actions eternally.

**Text:** In the first vision (14:1-5) John sees another scene in heaven in which the 144,000 martyrs from chapter 7 are standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion (the new Jerusalem). They have not "defiled themselves with women." This language does not mean that all the martyrs are male or that sexual relations are wrong. The language echoes that of OT texts concerning the armies of Israel (all male) and utilizes the common OT theme of unfaithfulness being (spiritual) adultery. Sacrificial language is used of their deaths (see 14:4), and they sing a song that only they can learn because they have remained absolutely faithful.

There is a great deal of language concerning harvesting of grapes, making wine, and wine flowing like blood. Most unusual to us is the biblical metaphor of "drinking the cup" of God's wrath. The image may stem from the drunkenness that comes from drinking too much undiluted wine and the resultant drunkenness with its staggering consequences. In any case the metaphor evolved so that what is poured out is not wine but God's wrath. Jesus of course speaks of having to "drink the cup" in the Gospels.

The first of the three angels of 14:6-13 calls upon those on earth to worship God and not the beast. The second angel announces the coming fall of Rome (Babylon the Great). The third angel announces severe punishment on those who go along with Roman emperor worship. In the next vision (14:14-20) John sees Jesus in the role of the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13 (seated on a cloud). Some think the Son of Man's use of his sickle to harvest the earth is a reference to the harvest of his faithful followers. Others think that both harvests (that of the Son of Man and the angel in 14:17-20) refer to the judgment of the unfaithful people of the earth. Humans are compared to grapes that are harvested and then crushed to make the wine flow (a reference to their blood). These chapters recall the Babylonians who sacked Jerusalem and the temple and took the people into exile. Rome is called Babylon (14:8, 16:19), and Mount Zion (on which the temple in Jerusalem stood) is the site of the heavenly temple in the heavenly Jerusalem (14:1, 15:5-8).

Chapters 15-16 narrate the last series of seven plagues in the bowls, the seven bowls of wrath that are poured out. The martyrs in heaven once again are praising God (15:2-4), while John is allowed to look into the opened heavenly temple. The holy angels, dressed as priests, are given the seven bowls of wrath, and no one is allowed to enter the temple until the bowls have been poured out on earth. This is similar to the Israelites' experience when God's glory filled the tabernacle in the wilderness wanderings.

The results of the emptying of the bowls are generally reminiscent of the plagues on Egypt back in Exodus: boils, water turning to blood, scorching sun, darkness, froglike demons, drought, and a mighty earthquake accompanied by hail. In fact, there are many themes from Exodus here, suggesting that John's readers under the emperor and Rome are like the oppressed Israelites under Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Among the allusions are these: the lamb has died so that the people will be saved; the martyrs in heaven sing of Moses and the Lamb; and the martyrs have crossed the sea, as the Israelites crossed the Red Sea (15:2).

Despite all these plagues and the people's knowledge that they were from God, the people still refuse to repent (just as Pharaoh refused to repent). Most of the results of the emptied bowls are fairly easy to understand. However, it is helpful to know that the drying up of the Euphrates after the sixth bowl (16:12) would make perfect sense in its first-century context. The greatest enemies of the Romans were the Parthians, who would come from the east and would have to cross the Euphrates.

The gathering at Armageddon (16:16) is not to be taken literally any more than the other symbols in Revelation. This is the only verse that mentions Armageddon, and many have placed entirely too much weight on this brief reference.

The name Armageddon means literally “the mountain of Megiddo.” (Interestingly, Megiddo was located on a plain, not a mountain, a reminder that the reference is symbolic rather than literal.) Megiddo was the place of numerous battles between Israel and its enemies, and this reference is simply a symbol of the final battle between good and evil.

## Discussion Questions

1. The Revelation was written not for outsiders but for Christians. Certainly one reason was to give comfort to the faithful. However, chapter 14 mentions those who have defiled themselves. How do you think Christians who were being tempted to renounce Jesus might hear these chapters? Can you imagine having to make the choice they were having to make?
2. Chapter 14 probably represents the most gruesome picture of judgment in the Revelation (see 14:10-11, 19-20). These scenes are not to be taken literally, just as the majority of John’s visions should not be taken as actual future occurrences. Why are these scenes so violent, and how should these be taken if not literally?
3. As question 2 suggests, some of these visions seem terribly harsh. Think about the worst sins and crimes that you know about (Holocaust, child abuse, etc.). Is it wrong to want these things to stop at any cost? Is mercy compatible with justice?
4. The visions of the pouring out of the seven bowls repeatedly mention God’s desire for the people to repent (followed by their refusal). Do you think that God disciplines us with various troubles? Why did John’s contemporaries not repent, and why do ours (or we ourselves) do the same?
5. Many believe there will be a literal battle in the Middle East called Armageddon. Does this belief do any good or harm? (On the one hand, it keeps people focused on the evil in our world and its eventual defeat. However, many have taken this verse and a few others to suggest that America should always side with Israel against her Arab neighbors. The result has often been racism along with ethnic and religious hatred, rather than concern with the justice of God.)
6. How do you think these first-century Christians identified with the Israelites who had been slaves in Egypt and exiles in Babylon?
7. How do we in 21<sup>st</sup> century America relate to these visions written down for people who were persecuted and even killed for their faith? In what sense has the Revelation spoken to you thus far?