

# Lesson 34

There are at least two approaches to the book of Revelation that are popular in the church today. One is the *preterist* approach, which is the approach that we are taking and the approach that I believe is correct. (This is very different from the extreme preterist approach (the 70 AD theory or Max Kingism), which is most definitely *not* correct.)

The preterist approach that we are taking says that, while the book of Revelation has many important lessons for us, the book is primarily about the conflict between the first century church and the Roman empire.

The other popular approach in the church is the historical approach, which sees the book of Revelation as a description of the entire church age stretching all the way to the end of the world. I have already mentioned some serious problems with that view, not the least of which is that it presumes we are living today in the end times.

But for those of you familiar with the historical view, you may have noticed that there is a major player in the historical approach that we have barely mentioned at all — the Catholic church. For centuries, many have seen the prophecies in this book as descriptions of the Papacy.

Does this book of Revelation have anything to say about the Catholic church? Yes and no.

No, in the sense of this book being a direct prophecy of the Papacy. I think the focus here is on the Roman emperors, not the Catholic Popes. I think both the context and the time frame demand that conclusion.

But there is a sense in which this book does have something to say about the Catholic church. How? Because the Catholic church today has rightly been called the last echo on earth of the ancient Roman empire.

It is an undeniable historical fact that the Catholic church is modeled, not according to the organization we find in the New Testament, but according to the organization we find in history books about the Roman empire. No one can deny that.

The Pope plays the role of the Roman emperor, the cardinals play the role of the Roman senate, the Catholic diocese corresponds to the old Roman diocese, and we could go on and on. Catholic canon law was explicitly modeled on

Roman law. And not just with their organization — even their clothing is modeled after ancient Rome. Cardinals wear red shoes because Roman law restricted the wearing of red shoes to specific levels of the nobility.

Why do I mention this now? Because we can use the book of Revelation as an open door to teach Catholics about the true church. We can, in all kindness, describe the nature of the Roman empire and then point out its similarities to the modern Catholic church. Catholics are difficult to teach because they reject the authority of Scripture, and they defer completely to the priests in their interpretation of the Scripture. Perhaps we can use Revelation to reach them.

And there may be more Catholics today than in the past who are looking for something different. Just this month, we learned that more than three hundred priests in Pennsylvania have molested over a thousand children. That's about 8% of the total number of priests who worked in the area during the relevant time period.

The Pope has now responded with his shock and his disgust. I can understand his disgust, but I cannot understand his shock. Why? Because this problem is not a new problem for the Catholic church.

How far back does the problem go? To answer that question I would point you to a specific book that raised an early alarm about the problem. That book described priests who were molesting young children, and it also described the coverup of the problem and the protection of the perpetrators by the Catholic church, and it appealed to the Pope to do something about the problem. When was that book written? Ten years ago? Fifty years ago? A hundred years ago? No. Try a thousand years ago! The book is entitled *The Book of Gomorrah*, and it was written by a Benedictine monk named Peter Damian in 1051. As I say, I can understand the Pope's disgust, but I cannot understand his shock about something that has been going on in the Catholic church for at least a thousand years!

Catholics may be looking for something else these days, and if so we need to point them to the gospel and to the church of the New Testament. And perhaps we can use this book of Revelation as an open door to reach them. Of course, our mission is not to bash Catholics or to bash anyone else; our mission is to speak the truth in love to everyone (Ephesians 4:15).

Last week we started Chapter 14, and we began by noting the contrast between those worshiping the beast in Chapter 13 and those worshiping the Lamb in

Chapter 14. The opening five verses of Chapter 14 gave us a beautiful picture of the church.

In verses 6-7 we saw an angel having the everlasting gospel and proclaiming the message, “Fear God, and give glory to him.”

Then in verse 8, we saw a second angel who gave us the announcement we had been eagerly anticipating — “Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city.” As we said, this symbolic Babylon is Rome. Just as ancient Babylon had been judged for being a great enemy of God’s people, so was Rome now being judged for the same reason.

In verse 9 we will see a third angel.

### **Revelation 14:9-12**

**9 And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, 10 The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: 11 And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name. 12 Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.**

God's wrath is reserved for those who worship the beast and his image and who receive the mark of the beast. Their judgment is coming soon, and the penalty is severe. Verse 10 tells us that such a person "shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb."

Is this language literal or figurative?

We know it is figurative. We know that the wine is not actual wine. We know that the fire is not actual fire. We know that the brimstone is not actual brimstone. Each of these terms is a traditional term used in the Bible to depict the judgment of God.

*Jeremiah 25:15 — For thus saith the Lord God of Israel unto me; Take the **wine** cup of this fury at my hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send thee, to drink it.*

*Psalm 11:6 — Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, **fire** and **brimstone**, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their **cup**.*

We know the language used here is figurative. But what is it describing? I think the first use of the word "brimstone" in the Bible answers that question.

*Genesis 19:24 — Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.*

Yes, that fire and brimstone was literal, but there after that literal fire and brimstone became a symbol for what happened in Genesis 19:24 — judgment.

For example, here is how Isaiah described a judgment against Edom.

*Isaiah 34:9-10 — And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into **brimstone**, and the land thereof shall become **burning pitch**. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever.*

Was Edom literally destroyed by fire and brimstone like Sodom was? No. Was Edom judged by God like Sodom was? Yes.

What happened to Edom? After they helped Babylon conquer Judah, Babylon also conquered them. Eventually they ceased to be a nation, thus sharing the fate of Sodom, albeit not in quite the same swift and spectacular fashion.

Would it even be possible to interpret that description of Edom from Isaiah 34 literally? No. Why? Because in Isaiah 34:9–10 we read that the land of Edom would burn endlessly, and yet in verses 13–15 we read that at the same time wild animals would live there. The language is not literal. Instead, the language is figurative, and it is intended to create an image of utter devastation.

Revelation is using the same language we find in Isaiah 34, but Revelation is using it to describe Rome instead of Edom. What we see here is language of judgment, and that is a perfect fit with the context here in Chapter 14. Remember what we saw in verse 7 — “Fear God, and give glory to him; **for the hour of his judgment is come.**” What we see here is a judgment that was coming soon.

These verses are sometimes used to talk about the final judgement of the world. Is that what we are seeing here? No. The context says no, and the time frame says no.

In my opinion, the final judgment is **not** being pictured here. Instead, what we are seeing here is the same thing we have been looking at in all of the surrounding verses — God’s judgment of Rome. And that judgment is being described here with terms that are used elsewhere in the Bible to describe other judgments by God.

And there is another reason I don’t think the final judgment is being discussed here. Notice from verse 10 that the judgment pictured here takes place “in the presence of the holy angels, and **in the presence of the Lamb.**” But what do we read in 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10 about the final judgment? We read that it will take place “**away** from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (ESV).

But saying that this language is not describing the final judgment at the end of all time does not mean this language is not describing hell. Hell is what awaited these faithless persecutors, and hell was the judgment they received. Hell was where they were headed once their lives on this earth ended. There is no earthly punishment that could ever compare with the eternal judgment of hell, and that was the judgment that awaited them. As with the rich man in Luke 16, when they lifted up their eyes after death they found themselves being tormented in flame.

Note that in verse 10 the wine of God's wrath is poured **unmixed**. What does that mean? It may mean that the wine is undiluted with mercy because the day of mercy and long suffering is now past. These people had been offered mercy in the gospel that had been proclaimed to them earlier, but now the day of judgment had come for those who rejected the truth and who persecuted the faithful.

This judgment is against all who worship the beast and who wear the mark of the beast. That certainly included the godless Romans, but it also included those once faithful Christians who had compromised with the world by denying Christ. They now wore the mark of the beast instead of the mark of Christ. And what a terrible price they were going to pay for rejecting Christ and bowing to Caesar! There is a high cost to compromise, and the time for payment had arrived.

Verse 11 tells us that the smoke of their torment would ascend for ever and ever. Again, we see a parallel with Sodom and Gomorrah.

*Jude 7 — Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.*

To this day, the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah continues to serve as an example. Likewise, Isaiah 34:10 tells us that the smoke of Edom's destruction "shall go up forever." That tells us that the judgment of Edom would also continue to serve as an example. The same is true with Rome — to this day, God's judgment of Rome serves as an example. We are studying and learning from that example two thousand years after it occurred. That is why the smoke in verse 11 "ascendeth up for ever and ever."

Verse 11 includes the haunting phrase, "they have no rest, day or night." That is very different from what awaits the people of God.

*Hebrews 4:9 — There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.*

We look forward to eternal rest; the faithless will experience external restlessness. But to say that we are resting in heaven, does not mean we will not be busy. Remember what we saw back in Chapter 4.

*Revelation 4:8 — And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes*

*within: and they rest not day and night, saying,  
Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and  
is, and is to come.*

Our rest In heaven will be from the work we are given to do here on earth, but the children of God will never rest from their worship of God.

The first half of verse 12 from Chapter 14 reminds us of verse 10 from Chapter 13. “Here is the patience of the saints.” They had cried out to God for vindication, and they can be patient in the knowledge that God knows what is happening to them, and God will judge the enemies of his people. They can be patient because of the messages of the three angels we just saw. First, our God is the true God, and his gospel is the everlasting gospel. Second, Babylon is fallen. And third, swift judgment awaits those who are persecuting the church. As verse 12 says, here is the patience of the saints.

The second half of verse 12 jumps all the way back to verses 1-5 by describing the group we were looking at prior to the three angels we saw in verses 6-11. “Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.” That was the group we saw in verses 1-5. That group is the church. They are obedient, and they are faithful. They walk with the Lord in the light of his word; they trust and obey. They are the faithful and true people of God.

### **Revelation 14:13**

**13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.**

The book of Revelation is structured around the number seven. For example, the book contains seven beatitudes. The first was all the way back in verse 3 of Chapter 1: “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.” Here in verse 13 we have the second beatitude: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.” (For those who just can’t wait, the remaining

five beatitudes are in 16:15, 19:19, 20:6, 22:7, and 22:14. We'll get to them all eventually!)

We understand that those who die in the Lord are blessed. To die in the Lord, of course, means to die as a faithful Christian. Those in the church are in Christ — that is, they are in the body of Christ, which is the church (Colossians 1:24). And how are they added to that body? How does one become in Christ?

*Galatians 3:27 — For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*

There is nothing complicated about that. What did we just see in the previous verse? “They that keep the commandments of God.” And what is one of those commandments? “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). As I said, there is nothing complicated about that.

The difficult part, and especially in the first century, was to remain faithful unto death after becoming part of the body. The pressure was intense to denounce Christ and confess Christ. But verse 13 is a reminder of the blessings that await those who stand firm. And verses 9-11 were a reminder of the fate that awaits those who turn away from Jesus.

Why does the statement in verses 13 include the word “henceforth”? I don’t think it means that this blessing is just for those faithful followers who die from this point onward. We know that this blessing applies to all who die in the Lord. I think the best way to interpret the word “henceforth” is that it means that the blessedness will occur after death for those who die in the Lord. The faithful child of God dies in the Lord, and then from that point onward that person is blessed.

The situation is very different for those who die outside the Lord. In this life and on this earth, Rome seemed blessed and the Lord’s people seemed cursed — but what a difference after death! Remember, things are not what they seem! A moment before death, the Christian is wearing rags, and the emperor is wearing royal robes. But a moment after death, those garments are switched. A moment after death, it is the faithful Christian, not the Roman emperor, who is wearing a crown (2:10). Christians who died to the sound of cursing, awoke to the sound of blessing.

Verse 13 ends with a beautiful elaboration of this blessing: “Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.”

Earlier we saw eternal restlessness; here we see eternal rest. They will leave their labors behind, but not so with their works. Their works will continue, both in eternity and also on earth as a testimony to their faithfulness. Our money will be left behind, but not our works. Our works will follow us into eternity. We should all be toiling to leave behind that sort of legacy — not a legacy of money or a legacy of property, but a legacy of good works. We need to make sure that our labor on this earth is not in vain.

*1 Corinthians 15:58 — Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.*

### **Revelation 14:14-16**

**14 And I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle. 15 And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe. 16 And he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle on the earth; and the earth was reaped.**

The word “sickle” occurs 8 times in the New Testament: once in Mark 4:29, and seven times in Revelation 14. A sickle and the act of threshing are frequent images in the Old Testament.

*Joel 3:13 — Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, get you down; for the press is full, the vats overflow; for their wickedness is great.*

*Jeremiah 51:33 — For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; The daughter of Babylon is like a thresh-*

*ingfloor, it is time to thresh her: yet a little while, and the time of her harvest shall come.*

A sickle is a sign of judgment, and threshing represents the act of judgment.

**Luke 3:17** — *Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable.*

The wheat and the chaff are about to be separated with regard to Rome. And how can God tell the difference? Simple. His people are wearing his mark, while everyone else is wearing the mark of the beast.

Jesus is, of course, the Son of Man in verses 14. We have seen many images of Christ in this book, but this must be one of the most striking: Jesus riding on a white cloud, wearing a golden crown of victory, and holding a sharp sickle ready to reap the harvest. Those universalists who believe that Jesus will save everyone no matter how they live or what they believe need to consider this image of Christ very carefully.

We see another angel in verse 15. The word “another” points back to the three angels we saw earlier in this chapter. Here we see a fourth angel. This angel comes from the temple — from the very presence of God — and delivers a message to the person on the cloud, who is Jesus: “Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe.”

That message confirms some very important points for us. First, it confirms the time frame of the book: “for the time is come for thee to reap.” And second, the message confirms what we have been saying about Rome — Rome’s place in the plan of God was finished. Rome had performed an important role in God’s plan, but that role was now over — “for the harvest of the earth is ripe.”

And finally in verse 16 the reaping occurs. Jesus thrusts in his sickle on the earth, and the earth is reaped. Is this the final reaping that will occur at the end of all time? I don’t think so. Our time frame and our context are still in place. In fact, we were reminded our time frame in just the previous verse. I think what we see here is what this book has been building up to — the separation of those wearing the mark of Christ from those wearing the mark of the beast.

I know there is a constant temptation in this book to leap forward to the end of the world, but we need to resist that temptation. The time frame of a prophecy is the most important clue in interpreting the prophecy, and this book

leaves no doubt as to its time frame, starting from the very first verse. The context is all about first century Rome, from the letters in Chapters 2-3 all the way to the Roman emperors we will study when we get to Chapter 17.

Faced with the choice of viewing these verses as a discussion of the end of the world or viewing these verses as a discussion of the end of Rome — shouldn't we choose the view that most closely agrees with the time frame and the context? If we do, then what we are seeing here is the end of Rome and the deliverance of the church.

Where does that reaping occur? Where does that separation happen? It happens at death. In this world we are all mingled together, but not so in the next world. This reaping confirms that what we are seeing here is the spiritual judgment of Rome and the spiritual deliverance of the church. Those who die in the Lord are blessed. Those who die outside the Lord are cursed. And that separation happens at their deaths, not at the end of the world. It will all be confirmed at the final judgement at the end of time, but there is a separation that occurs much earlier than that. All who have died prior to the Lord's return already know their eternal fate.

### **Revelation 14:17-20**

**17 And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, he also having a sharp sickle.**

**18 And another angel came out from the altar, which had power over fire; and cried with a loud cry to him that had the sharp sickle, saying, Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her grapes are fully ripe. 19 And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. 20 And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by**

## the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs.

We see two angels in verses 17 and 18 — one angel who carries a sharp sickle and another angel who comes “out from the altar” and who “has power over fire.” The first angel begins to reap clusters of grapes at the command of the second angel.

If anyone has any remaining doubts that we are seeing a judgment, these images should put those doubts to rest. The gathering of grapes is a classic figure for God’s judgment of the wicked. God tramples the wicked as one would trample grapes.

In Isaiah 63, the prophet describes a judgment against Edom in which God treads the winepress alone.

*Isaiah 63:3 — I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment. For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come. And I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me; and my fury, it upheld me. And I will tread down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength to the earth.*

Here in Revelation 14, Rome has replaced Edom as the great enemy of God’s people, but the imagery is the same. God tramples the wicked as one would trample grapes.

And what comes out of this winepress? Not wine, but blood. A lot of blood. A whole lot of blood!

The vast amount of blood in verse 20 dramatically depicts the severity of this judgment of Rome. The blood flows in a river as high as a horse’s bridle and 1600 stadia or furlongs long, which is about two hundred miles long.

The intent of this image is to frighten, and it does a very good job! This coming judgment will be terrifying. As Egypt lost horse and rider in the Red Sea, so

will Rome be engulfed, but this latter sea of blood will be much redder than the Red Sea!

Verse 20 causes a fair bit of trouble for the literalists. A river of blood two hundred miles long, a modest one hundred feet wide, and five feet deep would contain about four billion gallons of blood, which is enough blood to fill up over three billion people. Literal? Of course not. Terrifying? Definitely.

Why 1600 furlongs? Is there some symbolic significance in the number 1600?

It is probably not a coincidence that 1600 is the square of a very familiar Biblical number, forty. We have seen figurative references to the exodus all throughout our study, and even here we see a reference back to the plague that turned the Nile into blood. How long was the wilderness wandering? Forty years (Psalm 95:10). So the number forty may depict a tribulation, with the squaring of the number being used to depict a great tribulation. That is one possibility.

Another possibility comes from the symbolic number four, which we know represents the created world. The number ten denotes completeness, and so forty could be used here to depict the complete judgment of those who dwell on the earth (which, as we know, in this book means Rome). Why then square that number to get 1600? Perhaps there we see yet another symbolic use of the number two to represent Rome, as we have already seen numerous times in this book.

Which view do I favor? It's a very close call. The first view has a connection with this plague of blood, but the second view fits very well with Rome. I slightly favor the second view.

Sometimes the worst judgment that God can inflict on someone is to give that person what he wants. Rome wanted blood. Rome was bloodthirsty, and in fact Rome will be explicitly shown as a bloodthirsty harlot drunk on the blood of the saints when we get to Chapter 17. Rome wants blood? Fine. How about a two hundred mile long river of blood!

Finally, verse 20 tells us that the grapes are trodden "without the city." What does that signify, and what is this city?

We really have only two choices in identifying a symbolic city in this book. It is the same choice we have seen over and over again in this book. It is the same choice that is a major theme, perhaps the major theme, of the book: Caesar or Christ? This city is either the city of God (the church) or the city of Caesar (Rome).

So which is it? I think this city is the church. Why? Because of the verses we read a moment ago from Isaiah 63. In those verses God tread the winepress alone. At the end of the previous chapter in Isaiah, in Isaiah 62:12, the prophet refers to God's people as "a city not forsaken." God stepped out of that city to take care of Edom. I think God is doing the same thing here — stepping out of his city, the church, so that he can take care of Rome.

It is all symbolic, of course. God did not literally leave the church. But the image is a powerful one. God leaves his people in the safety of their city so that he can go out alone and take care of this terrible enemy of his people. And boy does God take care of them! When it's all over all that is left is a river of blood 200 miles long!

So where are we at the end of Chapter 14? Before the seals were opened we had a vision of heaven assuring us that the true throne was in heaven and not in Rome. Before the trumpets were sounded we were shown a period of silence in heaven, and we were told that the coming judgment was occurring due to a call for justice by the saints. Chapter 15 will show us a third vision of heaven, and this vision occurs before the bowls of God's wrath are poured out in Chapter 16.

This book has a truly beautiful structure! We need to make sure that we step back occasionally and view the book from afar so that we don't miss anything. Yes, we must do a word by word and verse by verse study, but we must always be checking ourselves to make sure that our interpretation also makes sense when the book is viewed from a wider perspective.

John did not send the churches a box of fortune cookies with a verse inside each cookie. John sent the churches an entire book inspired by God, and we need to keep that in mind as we study each verse and each word in this beautiful book.