

All Things New: Entering God's Rest
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 95; Matthew 11:25-30; Revelation 14:6-13

Our final Scripture reading today is Revelation 14:6-13. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His holy, perfect, and eternal Word. "Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth -- to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water." A second angel followed and said, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries." A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name." This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.""

I don't know about you, but rest hasn't been the easiest thing to come by the last couple of weeks. On one side of it, we've just been super busy making videos for church and school, trying to keep up with homework, still doing most everything we were doing before, only adding on making meals at home rather than eating out and being inundated with the latest news updates about the pandemic we're facing. Some of you are hard at work, a couple of you in the medical industry, we're praying for you in particular. Some of you are working from home and trying to be homeschoolers at the same time – prayers for you too. Prayers for all of us!

But rest has been hard too because going to bed at night isn't necessarily giving us the rest we need. You go to bed anxious and stressed, your body plays those things out in your sleep, and you wake up a lot, you find yourself tense so you can't get the shuteye you need. These are strange times we're living in right now, there is no doubt. Rest is essential, but good rest may be eluding you like it's occasionally eluded us.

And so, right now, before I go on with the sermon, I want to give an encouragement and a charge to us. Especially today, on Sunday, the Lord's Day, I encourage us all to take a Sabbath from the news and from our phones and from social media. Read your Bible and take some time outside our service to pray as a family. Play a game together. Take a walk. Read a book you've been putting off. Watch something uplifting. But the news will still be there when we get back. The social media squabbles are always there. I have a habit of checking them; it's a habit I need to break. Let's make the Sabbath a day of rest again to focus on the Lord and what He considers important. And let's consider resting more during the week too, if and when we can. The Lord did not make us to be under constant stress and anxiety. He made us to rest in Him.

We're talking about rest not only because it's important to us in this time of anxiety but because it's the key component of today's passage. We start to see the eternal judgment of God on those who are faithful to Him and those who oppose Him. We'll see more detail on this as we complete the book of Revelation, but here we have foreshadowing of what is to come. Some of it is frightening; some of it may seem harsh. But for the believer, final judgment is a release from stress and worry and a promise of perfect rest.

Last week, we saw the gathered believers, the symbolic 144,000 made pure by the blood of the Lamb, singing a song of praise to God. They are marked with the name of God and of Christ on their foreheads; long story short, all we who are believers are claimed by God permanently, in indelible ink.

This week starts with hope as well. Another angel enters the picture, and he has the gospel, the good news, to proclaim to every people group on the earth. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water."

This is the gospel in a nutshell; God offers salvation to all those who would flee from sin, turn to Him, and worship Him as creator of the universe. Through Jesus' gracious gift, all who do this will be adopted into His family. It's understandable to everyone, not just Westerners, not just people with a certain background or understanding of the world. According to Romans 1, everyone around the world has it built into their spiritual DNA to know that God exists and made us for Himself and for His glory; creation informs us of that truth. It's our sin nature that rejects that knowledge. The gospel is open to all because creation shows itself to everyone.

But this phrasing of the gospel that the angel brings also has the note of finality to it. This is the last chance; the hour has come. This is when you're standing at the airport and they say, "Final boarding call for flight 792 to wherever." This is when your waitress asks if you need anything else from the kitchen before it closes for the night. This is the last opportunity, the last chance to seek God before it all comes down. And since everyone knows the truth deep down, no one will be blameless when God's judgment comes. As Isaiah 55:6 says, "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near." The time is now.

Our key point today, one for the fridge, the one that will play into every other point today, is this: *don't wait to turn to Jesus*. I want to say this to anyone watching today who either hasn't done that, or whose lives don't match up with what they say they believe about God...do not wait to turn to Him. If anything, this time in world history, virtually unprecedented, is reminding us that we are not invulnerable, not impervious to disease and death. There will be a "last call" at the end of all history, but I don't know who here watching today is receiving their last call to follow Christ.

Please don't make the mistake of turning away from Him again. He is calling to you; He is beckoning to you. Listen and follow the call to trust and obey Him, to receive forgiveness through Jesus Christ, to become more like Him. You can pray to Him right now and He will take away the burden of your guilt and sin. Worship Him, and He will change your heart and make you new.

After this first angel is another angel who proclaims, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.” For those who have been with me from the beginning of this series, you’ll know that we haven’t seen Babylon mentioned in Revelation before. So why now? Why is this popping up?

You might know that Babylon took the southern kingdom of Judah into captivity in 586BC. Assyria had dismantled the northern kingdom of Israel in 722BC, but they never conquered the holy places of Judaism. But Babylon wiped it out, destroyed the temple, and hauled off most of the Israelites to their land hundreds of miles away.

Babylon’s goal was to make the Israelites into Babylonians. We hear of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the fiery furnace. But those weren’t their real names. Their Hebrew names were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The chief official of Babylon gave them Babylonian names to integrate them into Babylonian society. The king tried to bribe the best and brightest of Israel with fine foods. It was a calculated effort to convert them to their way of thinking, to get them to become fully functioning citizens of their pagan culture.

The Babylon in Revelation isn’t the land of Iraq, where literal Babylon was. We’re talking about spiritual Babylon, the darkness that wants to conquer God’s people and bring us into their evil fold by committing spiritual adultery against God. The second angel calls out both woe and hope, woe for Babylon, woe for all those that have denied God, but hope for the believer. Just like ancient Babylon fell and God released His people to go back home after 70 years, so too is coming a day when spiritual Babylon will fall, when the lie will be exposed and all will see the reality of God in His fullness – His love, His judgment, His glory and holiness.

Here’s your take-away point for the fridge this week: *watch out for spiritual Babylon!* Babylon is subtle; it tries to seduce us away from God. Spiritual Babylon tries every trick to turn us away from God. When Babylon conquered Judah, Babylon said, “You’re going to live with us now. Learn our songs; eat our food; choose your spouse from among our people. We’ll show you the good life your God didn’t show you.” Spiritual Babylon is always asking, “What has God done for you lately?” Spiritual Babylon says, “Find your hope in science and technology. Find your joy in mindless entertainment. Find your pleasure in whatever partner you like. Go and spend an hour in church if you must, but spend the rest of your time with me.”

Spiritual Babylon is so tempting right now because some of us don’t have a lot to do. To trust in the news reports, to spend days bingeing television, to feed ourselves on whatever we crave. Some people are defying stay-at-home orders not as a political point or protest, but just because they want to do what they want with whom they want when they want to do it.

But don’t buy into the lies of spiritual Babylon. It promises hope and gives fear. It promises joy but gives hollowness. It promises pleasure but gives emptiness. Spiritual Babylon wants you to fall in love with the world. Don’t fall for it. Nothing this world has to offer will compare with the glory and power and love of God. As the passage says later, “This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.” Babylon looks so tempting, but don’t you believe it. Endure, turn to God, and He will see you through.

A third angel warns the world: if you worship the beast and have his mark, you are marked for God's full cup of holy wrath. Now this is where things get dicey for us. We want to think of God as loving. We cannot imagine a loving God allowing the torment of anyone. And furthermore, unlike some pictures we have in our minds, it is not demons or the devil doing this. The torment of the wicked is in the presence of the angels and in the presence of Jesus Himself. How do we reconcile this picture with the idea of a loving God?

I'm going to put it bluntly: a loving God hates sin. He must hate it, because sin is not just making a mistake. Sin is not tripping over a rock or breaking your arms swinging from the monkey bars. Sin is defiance against God that inevitably leads to the harm of others. Sin is rebelling against the very reason you were created. And God will punish everyone who does not receive the gift of His Son, which is payment for the debt sin places on us.

Imagine a criminal who is truly sorry for his actions, who repents of his deeds, who begins to help others in jail while he awaits his trial. Everyone, even the one wronged by his crimes, admits he is a changed man. That person might garner the sympathy of the judge. Now imagine a criminal who is defiant, who brags about his actions, who is only sorry that he was caught, who dreams up more schemes while in jail, who lies to the judge and lies to the jury. We want him sentenced to the full extent of the law. Why? Because we understand justice. If the wicked go unpunished, there is no justice! A good God must punish the wicked.

The smoke of their torment rises forever not because God is unjust, but because punishment must fit the situation. When we punish someone on earth, even if they receive the death sentence, there's nothing you can do past that, right? We can only punish someone for their crimes to the end of life. But we are eternal beings. Our soul lives on. We will be resurrected. An eternally wicked creature, eternally defiant of God, eternally contemptuous of God, eternally rebelling against God, receives eternal punishment because the length of sentence lasts for the length of the criminal behavior.

The Bible described God as a consuming fire. Not that He uses consuming fire; *He is the fire*. His presence is torment for the person who has rejected Him. To be in His presence means warmth and love for the believer, but destruction and torment for the defiant; and yet God does not change in the slightest. All the promises of God, all the wonderful things that we will read about later in Revelation and know about from Scripture, they all revolve around God being with us. God's Kingdom is about God drawing near to His people, knowing His love, being in His presence.

The person who hates God, who wants nothing to do with God, will find that even when they are placed outside the direct presence of God, outside the gates of the Kingdom, they cannot escape Him. There is no rest for them, no peace, no security, because they cannot escape the reality that God is real, that God is good, and that they have defied Him. Rest comes from hope. The wicked, who have chosen their eternal path, do not have hope, and do not have rest.

In comparison, John is ordered to write by the voice from heaven – not an angel, but the Lord, it seems – “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.””

The dead who die in the Lord are blessed – not the martyrs or those who die for the faith specifically, but all of us who die trusting the promises of God and living faithfully. This reminds us that death is not the end for believers; it is the beginning. We don't need to grieve without hope for believers, because they will be in the Kingdom of God. The phrase "from now on" reminds us that we live in a wicked time, and we are blessed when God calls us to leave this earth and the growing unholiness that pervades it. We are blessed to only endure the trials of this world for so long. For the Christian, we do not hasten death, but it is not something we fear.

Finally, those who die in Christ have rest. Their deeds follow them. Here's what that means: their hope, their love, their faith, their kindness, the good things they did to help others, those don't go away at death. They are not just remembered by those who loved them, either. Those deeds will be remembered before the throne. We aren't saved by those good deeds, only by the grace of Jesus Christ through faith.

But those good deeds define who we've become, who the Spirit has sanctified us into being, and those show that God has indeed been at work changing us. Even when we get to the Kingdom and there are more good things for us to do, whatever they are, we will have rest even in the midst of them. The word in Greek means both to rest and be refreshed. We who believe will rest and be refreshed by the God of grace for all eternity. The anxiety and stress and worry of this world will be over and gone and will soon be a far-distant memory.

So our final point today is this: *make every effort to enter that rest.* The author of Hebrews contrasts the Jewish people who rebelled against God in the desert with believers in Jesus. The Hebrew people followed God out of Egypt but then regretted it; they turned their backs on God, and God said, "They will never enter my rest." The history of God's people is one of constant doublemindedness, of turning to God in need only to abandon Him later.

But Hebrews 4 promises believers that there remains a Sabbath rest for God's people, that we who trust in Jesus will have that rest. The one thing that could keep us from that rest is to fall again into knowing disobedience to the Lord...to reject His ways and to reject the faith, to know God's blessings and to have your own way instead. The promises are all there. We will have the rest of God. All it takes is clinging to that faith. In times like this, it's easy to go in either direction, either to rely on our faith and know that God is with us, or to despair and turn away. Don't turn away, my friend. God has not left you or forsaken you.

And neither has the church. We are here for you. Let us know what you need, even if it's just a listening ear. I'm happy to help and to listen. I know we are all taking it day by day, but we aren't doing it alone. We may have to keep our distance, but we are not far from each other's hearts. Let this time be a moment where you stop and listen to God's voice, where you earnestly seek Him, and you will find He has always been there.

Last super quick thought to end today: *the promises of God begin now.* They aren't all just for later. We don't experience them in full now, but we do get them in part. You may still have some anxiety or worry or fear from our world crisis, but God's rest is still for you now if you trust in Him. It doesn't mean every earthly thing is going to turn out all right. What it does mean is that you can be secure in Him. Trust in Him, and you will find the rest you really need.