

How can God's People Endure Persecution?

Revelation 14

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A few weeks ago, I travelled to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin for an annual pastor's gathering. It is a great time to connect with friends and colleagues in ministry. I always stay with the same roommate. We have known each other since 2002 when we started doing school together. But when I saw him drive up, I hardly recognized him. He'd lost 45 pounds since last year's retreat.

So I asked what had happened. He'd had a sabbatical last summer. So he exercised every day and cut down on carbohydrates. He looked strikingly different and healthier. I noticed he drank no pop during the week and took smaller portions. So I have wanted to lose 10 or 15 pounds myself. I thought, "If he can do it, I can do it."

For the first week back from that trip, I had high motivation – no snacks at night; no dessert. I even lowered my Tim Horton's order from triple-triple to double-double. When I weighed myself after the first week, I was down 2 pounds. "This will be easy," I thought. The next week, it was harder. I missed the comfort of snacks and desserts. When I weighed myself, I was up 2 pounds. I could feel my motivation melting away like snow under the intense spring sun. The third week, my commitment level stood at about 50%. Sometimes, I remained true to my dietary goals. Sometimes I ignored them. Now, I'm a full month into this new approach. During my weighing session this past week, I was down a whopping 1 pound from where I started. This would be harder than I thought. It will require perseverance and a long term change of habit.

Tackling weight challenges is not the only area of life that requires perseverance. The World Cup of soccer just started. Those athletes must have tremendous endurance to play soccer at the highest level for a full 90 minute match. Students must persevere in studying to pass their courses and move on to the next level. Parenting requires perseverance as each child presents different and unique challenges.

The word "perseverance" comes from two Latin words; "Per" which means through and "severus" which means strictest or hardest. So to "persevere" means to go through the hardest. We need perseverance to live out our Christian faith. It is hard to be a Christian. "Anyone who wants to live a Godly life will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12).

I don't think anyone here faces execution this afternoon because of their faith. But we all face trials and temptations to give in or give up. We experience it through peer pressure in friend groups to do something we don't want to do. We may face peer pressure at work to cheat, cut corners or accept a common unethical industry practice.. We face invitations

to sin that claim to make it easier or cheaper. We may face illnesses that ravage bodies or minds. Or we may go through tragedy and wonder how a good God could allow this. Sometimes we may doubt the value of keeping the faith or grow tired of the struggle when so many others have given up.

Yet this is the common experience of Christians throughout history. First century Christians faced severe and sometimes life-threatening persecution. We saw the forces behind this in Revelation when we met the dragon, beast and false prophet. This unholy trinity wages war against God's people. By the end of chapter 13, we face a daunting picture. The world worships the powerful beast. He reigns through intimidation and blasphemy. We see a false prophet who performs deceptive signs and wonders. He causes people to worship the beast and receive a mark on their forehead or right hand.

So how can God's people endure such persecution? How can we keep going in the faith when we face hardship? I want you to see two reasons we can trust God through persecution and how they help us persevere through tough times.

Revelation 14 English Standard Version (ESV)

14 Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ² And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³ and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴ It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, ⁵ and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

⁶ Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. ⁷ And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

⁸ Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality."

⁹ And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰ he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."

¹² Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

¹³ And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

¹⁴ Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵ And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." ¹⁶ So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.

¹⁷ Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸ And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." ¹⁹ So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. ²⁰ And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia or 300 km.

The theme of endurance or persevering in the faith comes from verse 12. "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus." So John calls Christians to endure. But on what basis can we endure? You can tell someone to persevere. But why? What good reasons can help us go through the severest? God sends these visions to give good foundation for John's call to endurance.

We can persevere in the faith by trusting God's ultimate protection and judgment. We can answer the call to endure because God is our protector and the ultimate judge over the world. We can persevere in the faith by trusting God's ultimate protection and judgment. So let's see how this text reveals this to us.

What is God's ultimate protection? God's ability to bring us into heaven. God promises to bring His people into His presence for eternity. We see this in verses 1-5. Remember verse 1 comes right after the vision of the beast and the false prophet. The people who worshipped the beast had its mark on their foreheads and right hands. So verse 1 presents a stark contrast. "Then I looked and behold," "look yourself; see what I'm seeing." On Mount Zion stood the Lamb." Mount Zion is this little spur of land in the center of Jerusalem seen as a place from which deliverance came. In contrast to the grotesque beasts and dragon, John sees the Lamb. This is Jesus the Lamb from Revelation 5. Yet He does not stand alone. 144000 stand with him. In contrast to the marked beast worshippers, on their foreheads they have the name of the Father and the Lamb.

We met these 144000 back in Revelation 7. At that time, they received the seal of the living God on their forehead. This protected them from the demonic army of locusts in Revelation 9. We talked in Revelation 7 a little about their

identity. Some suggest like they are Jews who came to Christ during the great tribulation or they represent the people of God throughout history. After all, the number 12 is one of completeness. 144000 is 12 times 12000.

But notice this multitude is in heaven. John hears a voice from heaven in verse 2 that he describes in 3 different ways; like the roar of many waters; like the sound of loud thunder; like the sound of harpists playing their harps. So it was a loud voice but musical and more like many voices blending into one. Then we see in verse 3 it was actually a massive choir.

“They were singing a new song before the throne, the four living creatures and the 24 elders. No one could learn that song except the 144000 who had been redeemed from the earth.” So the multitude sings a new song. It can only be learned by the redeemed multitude. So it must have been a song that had something to do with their redemption. Maybe it is a song about God saving them from the oppression they suffered on earth. Maybe they were killed for their faith. But God’s ultimate protection brought them into heaven.

I do need to deal with that strange statement in verse 4. “It is these who have not defiled themselves with women for they are virgins.” So what is that all about? It can’t be saying that only men go to heaven. That would be contrary to the rest of Scripture which shows the spiritual equality of men and women before God. It can’t be elevating celibacy as some sort of requirement because that would seem to disqualify anyone who is married. It’s more likely John uses this as an image for the overall purity of the people. In the Old Testament, the Israelites are called the “virgin daughter of Zion (2 Kings 19:21, Lamentations 2:13)” or “the virgin Israel (Jer. 18:13).” When Israel went after other gods, she was portrayed as unfaithful. So it could be that John portrays the 144000 like the pure people of God.

Notice this interpretation is strengthened in the latter half of verse 4 and in verse 5. “It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.” So this is an image of unconditional discipleship. In verse 5 John writes, “In their mouth, no lie was found, for they are blameless.” Now we have just read in Revelation 13:14 that “The false prophet performed signs for the purpose of deceiving those who dwell on the earth.” But there is no lying or deception in this multitude. In fact they are blameless.” Now can anyone in this room claim to live a perfectly pure, flawlessly following, never lying and completely blameless Christian life? We can’t on our own. But when covered by Christ’s blood and when brought into heaven, this will describe us. God protects His people by bringing them to heaven and transforms us into Christ’s likeness.

We see God's protecting work also in verse 13. "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors for their deeds follow them." So here again God ultimately protects His people. Though the beast and his followers think they have triumphed over God's people when they kill them, God transforms their death into a blessing. They can rest from their labors and somehow their deeds follow them. We don't know if that means some work that we do on earth will somehow continue in heaven or the good works done on earth will be rewarded in heaven. But either way, death brings blessing to God's people.

So back to our questions. How can God's people persevere in the midst of persecution? By trusting God's ultimate protection. **How does knowing about God's ultimate protection help us endure? It gives us the perspective we need to endure short term pain for eternal gain.** We will face persecution. God's protection does not protect us from physical death. For the short term, our lifetimes, we will have to persevere with persecution. But for the long term, eternity, we get to enjoy God's blessed presence. If we didn't know that such a life awaited us beyond death, we might not have motivation to persevere before death. But God paints glorious pictures of heaven throughout Scripture to help us persevere.

So let's move to the second reason God provides through this vision. "How can God's people persevere in the midst of persecution? "By trusting in God's judgment." We can persevere through persecution when we know that God will ultimately judge all at the end. We can persevere because we know God perfectly judges.

What is God's judgment? God will perfectly bring to justice those who reject Him and follow the beast. We see this unfold in verses 6-20. In verses 6-7, an angel flies to the midpoint of the sky. So everyone can see and hear him. He proclaims an eternal gospel to those who dwell on the earth. That's interesting because "those who dwell on the earth" has always referred to unbelievers in Revelation. But he proclaims to everyone that they should "Fear God and give him glory because the hour of his judgment has come." So it's like a final appeal. We might not think he brings a gospel message for we're used to good news about what God has done for us in Christ. But the gospel also includes the reality of final judgment. The angel concludes his appeal by pointing to God's awesome creative power.

Then a second angel arrives and announces the fall of Babylon in verse 8. Babylon became a symbol of the worldly center that oppressed God's people. The original Babylon had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon's temple. It

imposed Babylonian worship on the people and took away its brightest into captivity. For Christians in the first century, Rome was their Babylon. Why would God strike down this powerful earthly system? Because “she made the nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.” Notice it’s not like this was an optional decision for the nations. Babylon made everyone drink her wine or Kool aid. People think they have such freedom by throwing off God’s Word and ways. But Babylon seductively makes people drink her wine. The world got drunk on this wine and did not know it’s destructive power. So God will cause Babylon to fall.

Now up to this point, God’s judgment is pretty general and abstract. There is an appeal for everyone to fear God. The second angel announces the fall of the worldly system. But in verses 9-11, judgment gets very personal and uncomfortable. A third angel arrives announcing that anyone worshipping the beast receiving its mark on his forehead or hand will face God’s wrath or judgment. In the same way that people drank the wine of Babylon, they will have to drink the wine of God’s wrath. But this wine is poured full strength into the cup of his anger. Normally, they diluted one cup of wine with 2 cups of water. But here the mixture will be unmixed. There will be no dilution. It will be the full strength of God’s wrath.

The resulting destiny is described in the second half of verse 10 and the verse 11. “And he or she will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.” A few moments ago when we talked about God’s people persevering through short term pain for eternal gain. Beast worshippers will experience short term gain because of the mark but then face eternal pain.

Now, I am not going to skip over the difficulty of these verses. This is a terrible picture. But I want to finish verses 14-20 because they add to these picture. And then we will think through applying them. Verses 14-20 seem to tell the same story twice. One like a son of man with a golden crown on his head is seated on the clouds. He holds a sickle which was a sharpened curved knife used to cut down ripe grain in the fields. An angel from heaven commands him to swing the sickle and cut down the harvest of the earth for it is fully ripe. So he does and the earth is reaped. Some think this describes Christ because he is called “one like a son of man” back in 1:13. And son of man was one of Jesus’ favorite self-designations from Daniel 7. If it’s Jesus, then it would seem that this harvest refers to the reaping of God’s people. But others argue

that this is an angel. For Jesus would not receive a command from an angel and then follow it. So this would be an image of judgment.

Then comes the second scene where an angel carries a sharp sickle. Another angel comes from the altar and instructs this sickle-carrying angel to reap the grape harvest. So he swings his sickle and cuts off clusters of grapes. In that time, grape farmers took the grapes and placed them in wine press. Then you would have someone go into the trough to stomp on the grapes to squeeze out the juice. Or you would use a big stone to roll over the grapes. It would flow down the trough out an opening into a waiting container. If grapes had feelings, they would not enjoy this process. So what happens here? The grape harvest of the earth, unbelieving people, are thrown into God's great winepress. The grapes get trodden. Instead of grape juice, blood flows from the winepress as high as a horse's bridle for 1600 stadia or about 300 kilometers.

So now we have 2 disturbing images. Those who received the mark are tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb for ever and ever. Those who reject God are thrown into the winepress of God's wrath resulting in a river of blood. For a long time, people have struggled with verses like these. One modern way to deal with them is to simply deny the existence of hell or these images. Or some claim John exaggerates in an attempt to get his point across. Or some simply call this unfair and unnecessary. So they walk away from the faith or at least churches that continue to believe this and go somewhere it's more comfortable.

So what will we do? What will you do with this? We can either try to change God's Word to make it more acceptable or we can wrestle with this difficult section. To gain some understanding, we must read this from the perspective of those who first received it. Why does God give John these visions? Revelation is written to some Christians who would experience terrible persecution and torment by the powerful empire.

There seemed to be no escape and no overcoming this empire. And the tormenters seem to get away with it. But here tormenters experience torment forever. One day, the worldly system and power will be overthrown. They will not be able to escape and somehow retake power or control. They will not be released and somehow be able to strike terror again. They will be overthrown and judged. Therefore, even though it may seem like Babylon is winning; even though the tormenters may be getting away with it for now; even though many abandoned the walk with Christ, God would one day bring justice. Then this would be a message of hope. Then John can write "here is a call for endurance" because justice will come one day.

The second vision in verses 14-20 reveals that God will carry out a comprehensive and complete judgment of the entire unbelieving world. It doesn't matter how many people reject God, they will all be judged. This will not be too large of a task for God. The number 1600 in verse 20 could refer to the four corners of the earth multiplied by itself and one hundred, the square of 10, another number of completeness. So it reveals that God's judgment will cover everyone everywhere. No one will escape.

But we may not be facing extreme persecution for our faith today. **How does knowing about God's judgment on the ungodly help us to endure?**

It helps us resist giving up the faith for temporary comfort. Life is not a game. An eternal destiny of life in heaven or hell is at stake. When we grasp this, we will be much less likely to give up the faith for temporary relief. Revelation was also written to churches living in prosperity bordering on compromise. When their prosperity was threatened, they might be tempted to receive the mark so they could maintain their comfort. But this text warns against temporary gain for eternal pain.

Knowing about God's final judgment **enables us to give over injustice to God.** No unrepentant tormentor will ultimately get away with it. Though people may get away with something in this life, they will be called to account on judgment day. In fact, they face an eternity of torment. So we don't have to worry about unresolved injustice. God will ensure justice is served.

It moves us toward love even for enemies or tormentors. When we realize what our unbelieving persecutors will face apart from Christ, we can then pray for God to work in their lives. If we believe that our tormentors will just get away with it we are much more likely to hate them and wish the worst upon them. But with verses 9-11 clearly in mind, we can begin to see their need for God. He is the only one who can change their heart and open their eyes.

Knowing God's final judgment can **move us to fervent prayer regarding the lost and their need for God.** We just introduced at the May 29 congregational meeting a new vision for this church. Vision 2025 – 250 new believers. Can you imagine in 7 years having 250 people with us that today do not know Christ. Your family; coworkers; neighbors; friends; classmates; teammates. Think about the people you know who don't know Christ. This is what they face. "The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night." Hopefully these verses cause us pain and

anguish when we think of them. Sometimes, God gets us moving by initially causing us pain. The pain of this doctrine moves us to act.

In his book, “Reading the Bible Supernaturally” John Piper argues that the goal of reading the Bible is to see God’s glory, savor it and then act in response to it. When we think of savoring something or tasting it, we usually think of something pleasant. But sometimes, savoring results in something bitter.

Piper writes *“God uses not only pleasant emotions in response to seeing his glory, but also painful emotions. These too come from seeing the glory of God in Scripture. And these too are meant to be transforming, in their own way. To bring about change in a more indirect way, driving us away from destructive sins, in the hope that we will be drawn positively by the superior satisfaction in God’s holiness.”*

God does not cease to be holy when he disciplines his children. Yet this glory leads us first to sorrow. God does not cease to be holy when he says to those who are entangled in sin, “Be wretched, mourn and weep. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” James 4:9-10 God does not cease to be holy when he commands us to “count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” James 1:2-3

Does God cease to be holy when He reveals that those who reject Him will drink the cup of His wrath which includes torment and no rest forever? Does God cease to be holy when we read that there will be a day of judgment will result in millions being judged who have rejected Christ?

We may be tempted to conclude so. But we must also consider that every day this world exists is another day of grace. “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9).” Even in Revelation 14:7, God sends an angel calling on people fear God and give him glory before the hour of judgment falls.

We see again and again the Lord sent prophets decades in advance of coming judgments to call the people back before it was too late. It took Noah 120 years to build the ark – 120 years of notice was given that a flood was on the way. God has given notice of His final judgment for 2000 years since the writing of Revelation and other passages throughout the Bible. Commentator Craig Keener writes “Many today avoid trying to “scare” people into the kingdom. In a culture in revolt against authority and skeptical of threats, emphasizing God’s loving invitation may be a more strategic approach.

But John had no such scruples against “scaring” people, and as long as we speak to truth and are able to reason with people (Acts 19:9, 24:25), there remain occasions when this approach is appropriate.” He goes on to write “I know a young atheist who chose to consider the claims of Christ immediately rather than deferring the decision because the doctrine of hell made the stakes too high to ignore. Twenty-four years later that former atheist remains a committed Christian – and is writing this commentary.”

And God gave us the Gospel. We face persecution for our faith. We have an enemy that wages war against us because we are God’s people. But we have an eternal hope. Lost people need this hope. So we need to pray more earnestly and ask God to change the hearts of the people who are on your minds right now. We need to ask Him to open their blind spiritual eyes so they can see the clear truths found in God. We need to introduce them to Christ and the community of believers.

And we can keep going in our own lives because God is trustworthy to ultimately protect us and bring complete justice one day. So I want to invite you to pray for strength to put your trust on God if you are facing a difficult situation right now. And pray for those who don’t know Christ in your life that God will save them before it’s too late.