

Revelation as Trilogy
The Return of the King
Chapters 14 and 15: Heaven Prepares for War

Introduction: Chapters 14 and 15 begin the third and final section of the Trilogy, The Return of the King. As a reminder, in the first section of the trilogy, The Fellowship of the King, we watched as God sealed God's own people and vowed to protect them, even as they struggled to be faithful. In the second section of the trilogy, The Two Powers, we watched as the force opposed to God created an Unholy Trinity, whose intent was to deceive humanity into turning toward them and away from God, as well as to destroy the people of God who could not be deceived. And just as the people of God had been sealed God's people, the Unholy Trinity marked its people with the mark of the beast, 666. This final section of the trilogy concerns God's plans for battle, the battle itself, and the restoration of creation. Chapters 14 and 15 focus on the heavenly preparations for war with the powers of evil.

The Story: the scene opens with the Lamb on Mt Zion. Along with the Lamb are the 144,000 who not only have been sealed, but have two names on their foreheads, the name of the Lamb and of God. This is opposed to the 666 which is the name of the beast on the foreheads of those who oppose God and the Lamb. The appearance of the Lamb is a reminder that the Lamb (Jesus) is central to God's saving activity. He is the one who was worthy to open the scroll and unleash the future because he sacrificed himself on the cross. The 144,000 who appear with him are those who have been named and claimed by God. And the number itself, 144,000 simply represents the perfect number of believers (12x12x1000). These persons alone can know the new song, meaning the new reality that is coming in and through the work of Jesus, because they have been redeemed by God and because they faithfully follow the Lamb (as opposed to those who follow the beast).

At this point an angel appears halfway between heaven and earth. The angel announces to all humanity that God is about engage in war with the powers of evil and that there is still time to be saved by worshipping God. Note that God's desire is for repentance and restoration, not death. A second and third angel then appears. The second angel states that, even though the battle is not yet joined, Babylon has fallen. Babylon here represents all those nations and people who have opposed God and oppressed God's people. For the original readers, this would have been Rome. The third angel pronounces judgment upon all of those who received the mark of the beast. This pronouncement is not for gloating over the destruction of the beast but is instead a call for endurance of the saints who may be tempted to give in and allow the beast to mark them. This is followed by a voice from heaven offering a benediction over those who died because of their faithfulness to Jesus. The image now shifts to that of a sickle used for reaping those destined for God's wrath. The sickle will be used by Jesus to enact justice upon the earth. The image of this justice making is the clipping and gathering of grapes which will be trodden in the winepress of God's wrath. This winepress is outside the city (Jerusalem of which we will read more later) and the blood flows deep and wide.

Chapter 15 opens with the final grouping of seven; seven angels with seven plagues. These plagues will be the end of God's wrath. This is followed by the song modeled on the song of Moses in Exodus 15:1-8, which was sung in ancient synagogues to remind God's people that God would indeed set them free. The preparations are concluded when the tent of witness in heaven is opened and the seven angels, dressed like priests, prepare to pour out the wrath of God on the beasts and their allies.

Reflection: by the time D-Day was over in June of 1944 and the allies had broken out from the beaches and the Russians were on the move, the outcome of the Second World War was no longer in doubt. The Third Reich's days were numbered. This reality is at the heart of this chapter. In other words, as soon as God prepares for battle, God's enemies are essentially defeated. They do not have a hope or a prayer. Even so, just as in the Second World War, there is much fighting and death ahead.

Questions:

1. What have you been taught about the 144,000?
2. What do you make of the "new song"? Have you ever heard a "new song"?
3. Where do you see the battle for the hearts and minds of humanity continuing today?