

Bonus Lesson on Rev 14-15

Read aloud Revelation 14:1-5

Read Wright:

Who then are these 'elite warriors', as I've called them? What purpose is there in them suddenly being revealed at this point in the story? The answer is that John is once again working with Psalm 2. The nations rage, the peoples imagine foolish things, but God's answer is to set his king, his son, 'upon my holy hill of Zion'. Hence the mention of the lamb standing on Mount Zion in verse 1. We have seen the dragon becoming furious with the woman and her offspring, the younger brothers of the child who has been snatched up to heaven (12.5). We have seen the two monsters, the great imperial monster who comes from the sea and the local, secondary monster who emerges from the immediate community. They are the ones who, in Psalm 2, are raging and fuming, threatening and blaspheming. But now God is revealing his chosen king, and his chosen king is not alone. He is surrounded by his crack troops, his elite warriors. There is no doubt of their victory.

It is because they are elite warriors that (strictly within the bounds of the symbolism John is using) he speaks of them as 'celibate' or 'virgins'. Ancient Israel had a clear policy about going to war; if war was justified, war was also holy, and those who fought in it had to obey special rules of purity, including abstention (for the time) from sexual relations (e.g., Deuteronomy 23.9-10; 1 Samuel 21.5). As usual, we need to be clear about the symbol and the reality to which it points. In the symbol, this body consists of a hundred and forty-four thousand (we have met them before, of course, in chapter 7); they sing a new song; they have abstained from sexual relations. They are, in other words, the ideal representatives of the people of God, permanently ready for battle. In the reality to which this symbol points, they are in fact a great company which nobody could count; the chances are that they sing songs which all Christians would know; and some of them may be married and some single - but all are permanently ready for the real battle, which is the engagement with the monsters and their demands, an engagement which may mean at any moment that they will be required to suffer or even to die.

These elite warriors serve, then, to encourage the small Christian groups who, faced with the monstrous might of Rome and its local supporters, would probably feel powerless and helpless. Not a bit of it, says John: the lamb has been enthroned, just as God promised, and his elite stand around him, ready for the battle in which, following the lamb himself, they are going to win the victory. They will be the conquerors. These are the ones who, instead of the brand of the monster, receive (not a mark, but actually) the name of God and the lamb on their foreheads. This will mark them out in pagan society, of course, once it is known that they are loyal to this name rather than to that

of Caesar. But it will also mark them out in God's presence as those whom the Messiah will acknowledge to be his (Matthew 10.32).

This great crowd, surrounding the lamb, is not the sum total of all believers. It is the beginning, the great advance sign of an even greater harvest to come. That is the point of the 'first fruits' image in verse 4. At the ancient Jewish harvest-time, the first sheaf of wheat (or whichever crop it might be) was offered to God as the 'first fruits', signifying the expectation and prayer that there would be much more on the way. Even so, these one hundred and forty-four thousand are to be an encouragement to the churches. Already there is a great multitude! The lamb is winning the victory! We can carry on patiently.

And the way they must do so is by following him, especially, in holiness of life. For John, one of the major features of the dragon's whole system is the lie: he creates a world of untruth, a fake world, a sham system from top to bottom. But for the elite, no lie is 'found in their mouths'. Like the lamb himself (Isaiah 53.9), they are without blemish in this respect, as in everything else. This remains a challenge to all those who claim to follow Jesus. Truth and lies may sometimes be hard to tell apart, but this is where we stand at the watershed. God's victory is about the real world, the whole creation. The closer we are to God and to his lamb, the more we see everything clearly and should speak everything truthfully. The satan does his best work by keeping things out of people's minds altogether. Where that fails, he persuades them to believe, and to pass on, lies. 'It doesn't matter; it's only a little thing; God wouldn't mind, really; those are only silly, narrow rules; don't you know that God wants you to enjoy yourself?' and so on. Following the lamb means rejecting the lie. Always and forever (124-126).

Optional Discussion Questions

1. Where do you see your peers/ family members/ colleagues/ fellow church members most tempted to dismiss something as a "silly, narrow rule" that limits their enjoyment?
2. Which of the commandments that God has given are you most likely to dismiss as less important than the others?
3. What dangers lurk for us when we make those choices?

Read aloud Revelation 15:1-8.

Read Wright aloud:

When the Bible speaks about God 'judging', or putting into effect his 'judgments', it is just as much a cause for celebration as for anxiety. We have already referred to the famous passages at the end of Psalms 96 and 98, where the whole of

creation, animal and vegetable as well as human, sings for joy because **YHWH** is coming 'to judge the earth'. Why? Why is that good news?

Imagine a village in the outlying countryside of Judaea. It's a long way from the city, and even traders don't come there that often, far less government officials. A circuit judge comes to the neighboring small town once every few months if they're lucky. But that doesn't mean that nothing needs doing. A builder is cheated by a customer, who refuses to admit his fault. A widow has her small purse stolen, and since she has nobody to plead for her she can do nothing. A family is evicted from their home by a landlord who thinks he can get more rent from someone else. And a fraudster with his eye on the main chance has accused a work colleague of cheating him, and though nothing has been done about it the other colleagues seem inclined to believe the charge. And so on. Nobody can do anything about any of these – until the judge comes.

When he comes, expectations will be massive. Months of pent-up frustrations will boil over. The judge will have to keep order, to calm down accusation and defense alike. He will have to hear each case properly and fairly, taking especial care for those with nobody to speak up for them. He will steadfastly refuse all bribes. And then he will decide. Judgment will be done. Chaos will be averted and order will be restored. The cheats will be put in their place, the thief punished and made to restore the purse. The grasping landlord will have to give away, and the false accuser will suffer the punishment he hoped to inflict. And the village as a whole will heave a sigh of relief. Justice has been done. The world has returned into balance. A grateful community will thank the judge from the bottom of its collective heart.

Now magnify the village concerns up to the global level. The wicked empire, and its local henchmen, have become more and more powerful, taking money, lives and pleasure as and when they please. It's no use appealing to the authorities, because it's the authorities who are doing the wrong. So the cry goes up to God, as it did to the God of Israel when the Egyptians were making their lives more and more miserable. And God's action on behalf of Israel is therefore a great act of liberating, healing, sigh-of-relief judgment. Things are put right at last.

We would expect, of course, that Israel itself would thank God for his rescue operation, his great act of 'judgment' which has set his people free. But the story of the Exodus, which is once again dominating John's horizon, goes further than that. It isn't only Israel that will see what God has done and give him thanks. The nations will look on and say to themselves, 'There really is a God in Israel; there really is a God who puts things right, who judges the earth' (see Psalm 58.11). And, saying that, they will come to worship him (137-138).

Optional Discussion Questions

1. What global injustices weigh heavy on you?

2. What injustices have been done to people you care for?
3. What injustices have left you wounded?
4. How can we live into the promise of “the world returned into balance” in our day to day lives when injustice continues to be seen all around us (and when we are too often agents of injustice ourselves!)?