

“Learning to Die”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sermon on Rev 14:6-13, Nov 24, 1935¹

1. Is Revelation 14:6-13 a vision of things past, present or future? Is it a vision of heaven or earth?
2. In the first paragraph, Bonhoeffer says “Let no one take false consolation: after all, everything will be over before long; rather, let him be told: before long, everything will begin; before long now, things will become quite grave, quite critical for you.” What would this have meant to a listener in Nazi Germany?
3. Commenting on 14:7, Bonhoeffer exhorts believers to fear God and not the many things we tend to fear, saying, “All this fear will be the death of you. You are free from all this fear; it isn’t there for you” (280 par. 2). What does he mean by this? What does he mean when he says that “everything else is a game—only God is in earnest, entirely in earnest.”?
4. In a short time Peter changes from the fearful liar found in the gospel accounts to the bold leader and martyr of Acts. What brought about this change in Peter? Did the Peter of Acts have to keep re-learning to fear only God, or was his change in attitude persistent? Was his experience typical of believers described in Acts, or unusual?
5. Babylon’s been taken to be Rome the Catholic Church, a literal, rebuilt Babylon, or symbolic of the entire world system. As Bonhoeffer asks, what is Babylon today? Do you find it “joyful news” to recognize that “she is fallen, Babylon the great!” (281, par. 2)? Some, especially those who see the U.S. (or the West, or the first world) as Babylon, may feel somewhat chilled thinking of its fall, suggesting they might have at least one toe in that kingdom, that they perhaps do not “live and suffer on the margin, outside the city” (281, par. 1). What advice (advice that “alone is important” and “alone leads to life”) does Bonhoeffer give such people in par. 2 of 281 (“Don’t take her...”)?
6. Please groove on the concept of the works that follow those who die in the Lord (14:13), “for which he prepared us from the very beginning of the world; we don’t recognize them; they are hidden... But they shall be with us, because they belong to use as the everlasting gift of God” (283 final par.)
7. While Revelation gives some detailed prophecy, it also speaks of the perspective needed when undergoing tribulation: God is in control and his kingdom is eternal; all others will pass. God willing, we will not undergo *the* tribulation, but each of us faces a lesser tribulation at the end of our lives. How does Bonhoeffer’s sermon speak to you as you contemplate your own eventual death?

Fun fact: John Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible except Revelation.

¹ *A Testament To Freedom*, Ed. Geoffrey Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, Harper SanFrancisco, 1990, pp. 279-283

Leader's Introduction:

This sermon was written after Bonhoeffer's return from the US, during his years at Finkenwalde when he is training young pastors of the Confessing Church.

Revelation begins with the letters to the churches, followed by three cycles of seven woes (plagues, etc.--the 7 seals, trumpets and bowls. In between the trumpets and bowls, in chapters 12-14, there's an interlude describing the woman and the dragon, the two beasts, the lamb and the 144,000, and the harvest of the earth.

"Fallen, fall is Babylon the Great" (14:8) derives from both Isa 21:9, which prophesies of Babylon's downfall, and Dan 4:30, wherein a prophecy is given to Nebuchadnezzar, king of "Babylon the Great". Common interpretations of Babylon are Rome (also a rabbinic interpretation), or the Catholic Church, a rebuilt Babylon, or is symbolic of the entire world system.

The drunkenness (14:8) metaphor can be found in various places, including Jer 51:7-8 and others.

Vindication of the Righteous

14:6–7. On “midheaven” see comment on 8:13. The angel’s “good news” is the vindication of God’s people by judgment on the wicked (14:7; cf. Nahum 1:15). Because the activity of angels in heaven often corresponds to what happens on earth, however (12:7), this picture may refer, as some commentators have suggested, to the final proclamation of the good news of the kingdom (including both salvation and vindication/judgment) preceding the end (cf. Mt 24:14).

14:8. In a taunting mockery of a dirge, Isaiah 21:9 announces, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon” (cf. Jer 51:8), referring to the historical Babylon that would later drag Judah off into captivity. But Jewish writers of John’s day saw commonalities among all the empires that subjugated Israel, generally believing that Rome was the final such power (cf. Dan 2:35, 44). “Babylon” and its synonym, “the Chaldeans,” were used as ciphers for Rome in Jewish texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4 Ezra and the rabbis (although the rabbis use “Edom” more frequently). The Old Testament normally reserved the symbolic use of “harlot” for the sins of God’s people (with only two exceptions), but the allusion here is to Babylon in Jeremiah 51:7, who made all the nations drunk with its wine (i.e., Babylon was God’s judgment on them).

14:9–10. In the Old Testament, God passed around a cup of intoxicating wrath to all the nations (cf. Ps 75:8; Is 51:17, 21–22; 63:6; Jer 25:15; 49:12; Ezek 23:31; Hab 2:16; Zech 12:2; also the Dead Sea Scrolls; for infidelity, cf. Num 5:24). Fire and brimstone were appropriate for a spiritual Sodom (Rev 11:8; Gen 19:24), although the image may be broader than that (e.g., Ezek 38:22). (This text does not imply that they cannot repent if they do so before death or the world’s end—Rev 2:21; 11:10–13.) As often in apocalyptic literature, the wicked get to see what they missed (cf. also Ps 112:10); but Revelation omits a common apocalyptic feature, in which the righteous also get to see and gloat over the fate of the damned (e.g., 1 Enoch 108:14–15).

14:11. The eternal smoking of Edom (night and day; contrast 4:8; 12:10) is described in similar terms in Isaiah 34:10, but there the meaning is desolation, whereas here it is eternal burning and torment.

14:12. Many comfortable people today (influenced in part by historical misapplications of biblical ideals of mercy) dislike the idea of judgment. But salvation/deliverance in the Old Testament picture was not complete without vindication—removing the shame of the oppressed by punishing their unrepentant oppressors. The martyrs are here assured that they will be vindicated to the utmost (cf. 13:10).

14:13. Jewish texts spoke longingly of the day when the sufferings of the righteous would end. Greco-Roman letters of consolation stressed either that the dead were happy or that they were at least not sad, but Judaism especially stressed the peace of the righteous dead. The writer of 1 Enoch noted that the wicked would have no rest (99:13–14; cf. Rev 14:11), but the righteous dead would have great rewards (1 Enoch 103:3), and the idea of rest for the righteous dead occurs throughout Jewish texts (Syriac Menander, Wisdom of Solomon). Jewish funerary inscriptions regularly mentioned peace for the dead; over half the Jewish epitaphs recovered in Rome included the words “in peace” (hence

“rest in peace” is not only a modern concept). The image of reward for works is from the Old Testament and is common in Judaism and in the New Testament (see comment on Rev 22:12).²

14:6–20 The day of wrath. This succession of short oracles is unified by the use of six angels, who announce the judgment and carry it out. Like vs 1–5 it is intended to strengthen the Christian’s nerve, the former vision depicting a requital of good, the other a requital of evil works.

6–7 A last warning is given to the unbelieving of humanity. All the nations are summoned to repentance and the worship of God. The message is called *the eternal gospel*, since the eternal blessings of the good news still remain for those who will respond. Observe that the representation of an angel preaching the gospel is part of the symbolism of the prophecies; the term ‘angel’ means messenger, and the messengers are of flesh and blood.

8 The fall of *Babylon* is recounted at greater length in chs. 17–18. This name is applied to Rome in 1 Pet. 5:13 and in other, extra-biblical texts.

9–13 This warning forms a complement to the preaching of the eternal gospel in vs 6–7. Followers of the beast will drink *the wine of God’s fury ... poured full strength*. The Greek text describes the wine as ‘mixed unmixed’, *i.e.* mixed strong wine that has not been watered down (for the symbolism see Ps. 75:8; Is. 51:17–23). The symbolism of *burning sulphur* as a judgment goes back to the overthrow of Sodom in Gn. 19:24–25 (*cf.* Is. 34:8–10). **12** The call for *patient endurance on the part of the saints* finds an additional spur in the contemplation of the doom of the worshippers of the beast; just as the knowledge that many Christians will be called to suffer imprisonment and death (see 13:10).

13 The beatitude for *the dead who die in the Lord* serves a similar purpose. If *from now on* denotes a point of time it will be the ‘now’ of Christ’s redemption (*cf.* 12:10). An alternative translation is ‘assuredly’; in which case, the statement is simply emphatic—‘Blessed assuredly are the dead who die in the Lord’.³

² Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Re 14:6–13). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

³ Carson, D. A., France, R. T., Motyer, J. A., & Wenham, G. J. (Eds.). (1994). *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1444). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.