

How Long?

Turn to Revelation 14. Sarah preached a great message from this passage two weeks ago and I want to start where she left off. In verse 6 of chapter 14 we see the first of three angels and I want to just quickly make three observations. **“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.’” Revelation 14:6-7** The gospel will be and must be preached to the whole world because God is not willing that any should perish but that all would come to repentance and find life and forgiveness in him. Revelation is full of the images of judgement and speaks of God’s wrath, but here is his mercy in full display. Hear the gospel, fear God and worship the one who made the earth and sea, not the beast who comes out of the earth and sea. Judgment has come but this is still the time of mercy. The only hope for this world is to repent and turn to Jesus and be saved from the judgment that is to come!

“A second angel followed and said, ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.’” Revelation 14:8 Babylon is a symbol of empire, of the world’s system and strength, man’s wisdom, power, wealth and appetite apart from God. No one thought Babylon could fall or be defeated. The angel’s message is a warning to every empire, nation, every oligarch, every person who thinks their wealth, position or power makes them invincible. Take note: Babylon is fallen and eventually so will all who put their faith and trust in self and in the world’s system. Heed the message of the first angel. Fear God and worship the Creator who is Lord of all!

“A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives the 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 forever 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.’” Revelation 14:9-11 This is a warning that those who worship the beast will share the same destruction, the same end as the beast. (You ride with an outlaw you die with an outlaw. Gus) If you reject God and his mercy, his forgiveness and salvation, the end is loss and torment.

Notice there is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast, (driven, in bondage) but for those who worship the Lord, the Spirit says, “They rest from their labor” (14:13).

Another angel shows up and says, **“Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” Revelation 14:15** Sarah quoted from Brian Davenport a couple of weeks ago that ripe for harvest and ripe for judgment smell the same. It’s time for harvest and judgment. There is a definite time God has set and ordained. We don’t know when, but judgment is coming and there is no stopping it or avoiding it. When I think about judgment, I think in terms of the wrath of God, his fury being poured out against sin. Revelation certainly speaks of that, but keep in mind judgment is God making things right. The judge of all the earth is coming to right the wrongs, to provide justice for those to whom it has been denied. Order will be restored. Judgment in that sense is good news. It was good news to the first century churches that John pastored, to whom he sends this letter, this vision, but they must have asked the question we are still asking: How long? When is this appointed time coming? How long do we have to wait? How long will God delay his judgment? It’s universal!

David asked, **“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” Psalm 13:1-2** How long do I have to endure injustice?

It’s the question the martyrs asked in Revelation 6. John writes, **“I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.” Revelation 6:9-11** Not exactly the answer they were hoping for. How long? Wait a little longer. Not until more are martyred.

It’s not just the slain that ask the question. Eugene Peterson writes, **“The question echoes through cultures, reverberates through centuries. The injustice is not always blatant, and the cries for redress are not always broadcast. For every major martyr killed in courageous confrontation with the wicked, there are a million minor martyrs under that altar who persevere through lifetimes of injustice, crying silent prayers.” ...Eugene Peterson**

Peterson is correct. It's a universal cry. Life isn't fair. How long before the judge comes to make things right? How long before healing comes, deliverance comes, the answer comes? He continues, **“The desire for judgment develops. The frustration of delay deepens. All the raw material of injustice is served up in the ordinary experience of being female or male, being child or parent, being husband or wife, being employer or employed. We don't have to wait around for a war, or go to the ghetto, or get caught in a pogrom. In the daily places of love and work we come up against seemingly irremediable injustice. The world is not a good place for justice. We learn this early. Children, with instinctive moral sense, ignorantly but accurately paraphrase scripture, ‘It's not fair.’ Nobody gets what they deserve, whether in reward or punishment.”...Eugene Peterson**

In March of 1965 after marching approximately 50 miles from Selma to Montgomery Alabama to demonstrate for the right to vote for African Americans, Dr. Martin Luther King gave a speech that concluded with asking and answering that same question, “How long?” Some of you may recall the speech. “I know you are asking today, “How long will it take?” Somebody's asking, “How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?” Somebody's asking, “When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?” Somebody's asking, “...How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?” I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because “truth crushed to earth will rise again.” How long? Not long, because “no lie can live forever.” How long? Not long, because “you shall reap what you sow.” How long? Not long: ‘Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne, Yet that scaffold sways the future, And, behind the dim unknown, Standeth God within the shadow, Keeping watch above his own.’ [*The Present Crisis*. James Russell Lowell 1819-1891] How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long, because: Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword; His truth is marching on. He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat; He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat. O, be swift, my soul, to

answer Him! Be jubilant my feet, Our God is marching on. Glory, hallelujah...His truth is marching on.”

How long? Not long Dr. King said. Three years later he was gunned down by a coward's bullet on the balcony of a Memphis motel. There were more casualties to come in the struggle for civil rights. How do you keep marching and believing when there is no justice in sight? How do you keep hope alive when evil seems to be winning? The world without Jesus responds to the frustration of injustice by plunging deeper into hopelessness and despair. “There is nothing to wait for. No hope. No Savior is coming.” They refuse to repent, refuse to turn from their idolatry and sin. **But the believer in Jesus continues to cry out, “How long?” not in despair but in hope. We aren't like the rest of the world. We maintain hope in a culture of violence and hopelessness. How? Revelation shows us an important key: Worship!**

The more you read and study Revelation, the more you see the importance of worship. Worship provides the context for everything in the book. Worship keeps centering God's people, keeping us focused on the Lamb, on the throne, on the Sovereign rule and reign of our God and not on the temporary problems here. Revelation opens with the letters to the seven churches. The churches then and now, were and are engaged in a battle against wicked powers and principalities. The church is in dark and difficult times in Revelation 2 and 3 and then suddenly in chapters 4 and 5 we are in an incredible worship service, adoring the Father, the one who was and is and is to come, the one who created all things. The church sings a new song: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” He is the one who has redeemed men and women for God from every tribe and language and people and nation and has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve our God and we will reign with him on the earth. From being persecuted and ridiculed and executed on the earth to ruling and reigning with Jesus. Worship reminds the church of who God is, of who we are in Christ Jesus and of what the future holds for us.

In Revelation 6 the martyrs cry out “How Long” but in the next chapter we see them, the ones who have come out of great tribulation, before the throne of God. Never again will they hunger or thirst and God wipes the tears from their eyes. Their “How long” is answered in their worship as they sing **“Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever.”** In Revelation 8 and 9 we see the seven trumpets and the earth reeling from the plagues that visit it but then in Revelation 11 and 12 there is

worship again as God's saints are rewarded. Trouble and judgment are coming, dark days on the earth and its inhabitants, but there is hope because 11:15 says **"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever."** Revelation 12 tells us we can rejoice because God's saints overcome the devil "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Dark and difficult days, but when you see them coming, worship the One who gives us the victory through the blood of the Lamb.

Terrifying beasts come out of the sea and out of the land in Revelation 13 but don't worry because Revelation 14 John heard a sound like harpists playing their harps and with it was the sound of the redeemed from the earth worshiping and giving praise to the Lamb of God. Harvest and judgment comes in 14 and Revelation 15 opens with seven angels with the seven last plagues, but then John writes, **"I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts [judgments] have been revealed [made manifest].'"** Revelation 15:2-4

How long? I don't know, but I know his deeds and his judgments are righteous. I know he has not forsaken his people. The first century church is reminded of the song of Moses the servant of God. The Jewish believers knew the story well. Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, out of bondage and through the Red Sea on dry ground. When Pharaoh and his army tried to cross the Sea, the Lord closed the waters back up on them and they were all drowned. **"Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: 'I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and its rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might and he has become my salvation; this is my God and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior, the Lord is his name.'"** Exodus 15:1-3

Moses' song is a song of victory and triumph as is the song of the Lamb. The people of Moses, the Israelites, were led in victory through the Red Sea, led through the wilderness with God's miraculous provision and care, disciplined by God's judgments but prepared so that

finally they cross the Jordan and come into their inheritance, the promised land. They rehearse and sing the song of Moses, “I will sing unto the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously...” And John sees the people of God standing by a sea mixed with fire. These are the people of God who have come through the sea of baptism, washed clean and their sins forgiven, they’ve come through the fire, tested and tried, disciplined by judgment, and now they have come into their inheritance, into the promised land and they sing the song of the Lamb. We have triumphed and overcome the enemy through the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony. We worship, singing the song of victory in Jesus! “Great and marvelous are your deeds, just and true are your ways, for you alone are holy.” How long before this all happens and we are delivered to sing the song of the Lamb? I don’t know, but what I know to do while we wait is to worship, to declare the faithfulness of the God we love and know and serve.

Peterson writes, **“St. John, an exiled pastor with responsibility for seven congregations of Christians subject to a barrage of violence and propaganda from without and infiltrated within by cunningly attractive lies, can think of nothing better than to call them to worship...Worship is the essential and central act of the Christian. We do many other things in preparation for and as a result of worship: sing, write, witness, heal, teach, paint, serve, help, build, clean, smile. But the centering act is worship. Worship is the act of giving committed attention to the being and action of God. The Christian life is posited on the faith that God is in action. When we worship, it doesn’t look like we are doing much – and we aren’t. We are looking at what God is doing and orienting our action to the compass points of creation and covenant, judgment and salvation.” Eugene Peterson**

“After this...” It is after worship, as God’s people sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb, in this context comes this final judgment. In the context of worship, God the righteous judge makes things right. How long? How long before everything is made right, order is restored, tears are wiped away? I don’t know. But what I do know, in spite of it all, for as long as it takes, as long as I have to wait, as long as he delays, I’m going to praise him! I’m going to worship and as I do I will remember who he is, the faithful God, the one who honors his word and keeps his promises. I will worship and declare his greatness, I will express my gratitude and thanks to Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. I will remember that he makes all things new in his time. I will remember that he has set a time, that weeping only endures for a night but joy comes in the morning and it is going to last forever and ever!