

The Grim Reaper

A Preview of Things to Come – Part VI

Revelation 14:14-20

Introduction

One of the most recognizable figures of all time is simply named, the Grim Reaper. He is typically caricatured as a skeleton wearing a black robe. His face is almost entirely hidden by his hood, his hands are mere bones, and he always has in his possession a scythe – or a sickle.

In the western world, going back to the Medieval Period, the Grim Reaper often rode a pale horse or was driven in an old coach by pale white horses.

The Grim Reaper can be traced back to Rome, and even further back through the mythologies of Greece. The Greek god Cronos was supposedly the original Grim Reaper. He was given a scythe (sickle) to fight his way out of the earth where he was held captive by his father. With this sickle, he escaped and then killed his father. However, trouble arose when he became so fearful for his own life that he used the sickle on everyone who came near him.

The character of the Grim Reaper developed through the centuries. He became known as the one who actually came to take people away when their time was up. He supposedly had the power to determine death with the mere touch of his scythe; it was he who led departed spirits to the afterworld.

In the occult world, the Grim Reaper is the symbol for death itself.

He is universally held in some form or another. Eventually, everyone meets this hooded agent of death.

One poet put it rather simply when he wrote, “You can be a king or street sweeper, but everyone dances with the Grim Reaper.”ⁱ

The entire world attempts to mitigate the terminal touch of the Grim Reaper.

A *Wall Street Journal* article that I read some time ago, reported the extravagant efforts being made to avoid the concept of death.

In the country of Madagascar, people save up money for years to exhume the body of a departed loved one, wrap them in a new shroud, and throw a party introducing them to all their friends. They pay

dearly to cater food for hundreds of people and then, with live bands playing, they literally hoist the body of their loved one on their shoulders and dance with the dead.

Those who do this believe it keeps their deceased relatives among the living. They talk of having dreams in which their departed family members complain of being cold in the tomb. As a result, this religious frenzy was developed that is called “the turning of the dead”.

These people are also assured that their departed loved ones can and will give them health, wealth, and happiness. However, if the dead are left neglected and cold in their tombs, the result will be unemployment, disease, and misery.

The living relatives are convinced that those who have died must be familiar with their lives in order to help them. So they stroll through their towns, carrying their shrouded loved one on their shoulders, showing their ancestors things that are new; introducing them to children who were born since they last left their tomb.

One believer in Christ was interviewed. He refused to participate in this practice any longer, stating that he no longer believed that the departed dead were even interested – and they certainly could not respond with gratitude, having been brought from their tombs for a party. For this disbelief, he and other Christians are often disowned.

I found it interesting that in the nineteenth century, the queen of this country ordered her soldiers to push all converts to Christianity off the nearby cliffs, which they did.

Today, much of the religion in this country is bondage to their fear of death and being left alone in the tomb.

This article added that people in this country try to lead good lives so that they will not be forgotten by their families when they die. They live so that they themselves will be brought out of their tombs one day to party with their families in the light of day.ⁱⁱ

How tragic this is. However, this is their way of somehow avoiding the touch of the Grim Reaper.

This reminds me of the terrible reality of life after death for those who do not know Jesus Christ. It is reminiscent of the man that Christ spoke of who ended up in Hades and lifted his eyes and called for just a drop of water. He then begged that someone go back to his family and warn them not to come to this terrible place of God's judgment (Luke 16).

If these shrouded skeletons could speak to the revelers at their party, they would not be promising them wealth and health, but would be warning them of the realities of death.

The Grim Reaper is nothing to celebrate – once death has indeed touched the living and translated them to their eternal state, there is no turning back.

For the believer, there is the promise that,

. . . to be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord. (II Corinthians 5:8)

There is the immediate translation of our spirit to heaven and once there, we await the resurrection of our bodies, which will be instantly recreated and glorified at His command and reunited with our spirits to live forever with Him (I Corinthians 15:50-57).

Now where did mankind universally come up with this concept of a Grim Reaper?

This came from the truth of God, written on the heart of mankind (Romans 2:5) that,

. . . it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment. (Hebrews 9:27)

Mankind creates religions which are nothing more than fire escape hatches and spiritual loopholes to try to bring them comfort.

“Maybe we’ll turn the bones of our loved ones; maybe we’ll bring their skeletal remains out for a party and maybe that will keep us safe.”

“Maybe we’ll bury our loved ones in a church graveyard. That’s it – that’ll help buy a ticket to everlasting life.”

Or even better, “Maybe we’ll bury our loved ones inside a church.”

Today, the cathedrals of Europe are nothing more than indoor graveyards for the wealthy and politically connected. The poor people were buried outside or their bones were collected in underground vaults – at least they were near the church.

I have walked through the corridors underneath St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna, Austria, where so many religious leaders lie in caskets on shelves of stone and plaster. I have even stood by the caskets of religious leaders whose burial dates correspond with

the ministry of Martin Luther. Luther’s reformation threw Austria and everyone else in the church into an uproar.

I have stood in front of the casket of a bishop who served during the lifetime of Martin Luther. I silently wondered how he might have responded to Luther’s gospel in which he declared that according to the scriptures, salvation was by faith alone in Christ alone. I hoped the bishop was one who had believed.

I looked at all the bones stacked inside these underground vaults – many of them of people who died during the bubonic plague of 1735. They would have considered it a wonderful place to be buried. They were buried inside the church – in the basement, but, no matter, it was safe!

However, to be buried upstairs, in the floor of the Cathedral nearest the altar, was even safer!

So, inside the church of St. Stephens are the tombs of kings and princes and members of the royal dynasties.

Mankind struggles throughout life with the thought of death. Mankind fears the sickle of the Grim Reaper.

A few years ago, a movie was released called *The Bucket List*. I read that it was about two terminally ill men – played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. These men take a road trip together to do the things they always said they would do before they “kicked the bucket”. Nicholson was interviewed by *Parade Magazine* before the movie came out and asked about his personal beliefs.

Nicholson answered, “I used to live so freely. I always said, ‘Hey, you can have whatever rules you want – I’m going to have mine. I’ll accept the guilt. I’ll pay the check. I’ll do the time.’ I chose my own way. But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve had to adjust. We all want to go on forever, don’t we? We fear the unknown. Everybody goes to that wall, yet nobody knows what’s on the other side.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Nothing could be further from the truth. We have been told exactly what is on the other side of death.

I have found it fascinating to discover in my studies that this nearly universal metaphor of death – the Grim Reaper – is actually found in scripture. In fact, there is coming a day when the hood will be taken off and the robe will be thrown aside for mankind to discover, too late, that the caricature of the Grim Reaper is, in reality, none other than Jesus Christ.

In Revelation chapter 14, John previews for us what happens through the remainder of the Tribulation period. He refers to the coming of Christ

and two different harvests that take place by the reapers.

Two different metaphors are used for the reaping of God's judgment on Earth. One is a harvest of grain, in verses 14-16, and the other reaping is a harvest of grapes, in verses 17-20.

- The harvest of grain is an overview of the coming bowls of wrath that are about to be poured out upon the earth as God's wrath is unleashed in one final series of cataclysmic events.
- The harvest of grapes is an overview of the Battle of Armageddon where the final battle is fought as Christ returns to establish His earthly reign for a thousand years.

Both harvests involve a sickle and reaping.^{iv}

Now the detailed accounts of both of these harvests will be revealed in Revelation chapters 15-19. We will get to these chapters eventually.

The Harvest of Wheat

Let us look at the first reaping that takes place in the harvest of wheat or grain.

Notice Revelation 14:14.

Then I looked and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand.

Here is *the* genuine Grim Reaper. Here is the nightmare of mankind come to life in living color. This is no cartoon character or funny joke. *This* reaper is Jesus Christ.

We are told in this verse that He comes on a cloud. This is more than a fluffy cumulonimbus cloud or even a nimbostratus cloud. I had to look this up, so hold your applause! The word *cloud* is an interesting study throughout scripture as it relates to the presence and glory of God.

Donald Grey Barnhouse made the comment that one particular cloud follows the Lord Jesus Christ from eternity to eternity. It is the cloud of the glory of God, the Shekinah glory.^v

- This is the cloud of God's presence that led the children of Israel through the wilderness in Exodus 13.
- This is the same cloud that appeared when Moses was given the law on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19.

- This is the cloud that covered the Lord when He came to speak to Moses after the seventy elders were chosen in Numbers 11.
- This is the cloud that filled the glory of Solomon's temple. The Bible reads, "... the cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord." (I Kings 8:10-11)
- Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit as she, a virgin, conceived by the power of God. A. T. Robertson, a noted Greek scholar, says that these words suggest the cloud of glory representing the presence and power of God as He overshadowed Mary in Luke 1.^{vi}
- This is the same cloud that received Christ as He ascended into the heavens after His resurrection in Acts 1.
- This is the Shekinah glory that knocked Saul of Tarsus off his horse as he raced on horseback to Damascus to hunt down Christians in Acts 9,
- These are the clouds of Shekinah glory that envelope the church as it is raptured to meet the Lord in the air – in the clouds – that is, the very presence of the glory of God (I Thessalonians 4:17).
- These are the clouds in the vision of Daniel in which a Son of Man, which is a reference to the Messiah, will return with the clouds of heaven (Daniel 7:13). In other words, He is going to return one day to Earth with the display of divine brilliance and glory.
- Jesus Christ said of Himself in Luke 21:27, "...they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

This is exactly what we see happening in Revelation 14:14. This is the fulfillment of Christ's own prophecy. Here He comes!

This also means that we, the church, are returning with Him to set up this reign on Earth. We are not floating on fluffy white clouds, but rather, this is a reference to the fact that when we return with Christ to set up His kingdom, we will be surrounded by the brilliant light and incredible splendor of our Sovereign's glory.

Now you might have wondered why John writes, "a son of man" instead of "the son of man," in verse 14. I believe it is more than likely to strengthen the connection to Daniel's prophecy in which Daniel

referred to the coming of “a Son of Man”. John is effectively telling us that the coming of Christ is the fulfillment of Daniel’s vision.

John used the same phrase in Revelation chapter 1 and there is absolutely no doubt to whom he is referring.

In fact, notice the next phrase in verse 14.

. . . [this] son of man, having a golden crown on His head . . .

This *crown* is a *stephanos* (στεφανος), which was a crown given to conquerors; to those who were victorious. Later, in chapter 19, John will change the word from *stephanos* to *diadema* (διαδημα), or *diadem*, to refer to the crown of a monarch.^{vii}

So Christ comes announcing His mastery and victory over every enemy and later, sits upon David’s throne as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

By the way, in Revelation 14:14, we are reading for the last time any reference to Jesus Christ by this preferred title “Son of Man”.

The Lord used this often to emphasize His full humanity, yet His full and complete deity as the fulfillment of prophetic scripture. However, Revelation 14:14 is the *last* time we hear this title used.

I think it is interesting that the *first* time we encounter this title in the New Testament is in Matthew chapter 8 when we read that “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” (Matthew 8:20)

In other words, Jesus owned nothing.

Now, in the last usage of the title, the Son of Man is coming as a victorious king to claim ownership of the entire world. He will be seen as owning everything.

The first time He came was in poverty. The second time He comes, it will be in power.^{viii}

The first time the Son of Man appeared, He came as a sower; when He returns, He will come as the reaper.^{ix}

Jesus will come wrapped in the Shekinah glory of His divine radiance.

Now just as we have seen many of the events taking place on Earth signaled by the announcement of an angel, an angel pulls the trigger, so to speak, on Christ’s judgment of Earth. Notice verses 15-16.

And another angel came out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, “Put in your sickle and

reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.”

Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

I agree with one author who wrote that this phrase “the earth was reaped” is one of the most tragic and sobering statements in all of scripture. Simply, and without fanfare, it records the executing of divine judgment.^x

The details of this reaping will be unwrapped in the pouring of the bowls of God’s wrath which takes place in chapter 16.

- Terrible sores will be on the bodies of the antichrist’s followers – verse 2;
- Oceans will turn to blood and every sea creature will die – verse 3;
- Rivers and springs of water will also become blood – verse 4;
- The sun’s heat will intensify – verse 8;
- The world of the antichrist will be plunged into darkness – verse 10;
- The Euphrates River will dry up to prepare for an attempted, massive attack upon Israel – verse 12.

The Grim Reaper of mythology and legend is nothing compared to the Divine Reaper who comes in judgment.

The warning is clear to all of us today – believe in the gospel of grace by faith in this Son of Man, who is fully man, yet fully God. Come in humble faith to Jesus Christ while He is a Gracious Redeemer and then never fear having to face Him as *the* Grim Reaper.

There is no need to fear. In fact, for every one of us who believe in Christ, we will actually be in verse 14 and verse 17 for we will be coming back with Him in this future scene of judgment, victory, and glory.

The Grapes of Wrath

John follows this with a preview of the Battle of Armageddon – an event that accompanies the return of Christ. This is the battle against the antichrist and his forces which brings the Tribulation period to a close.

This is really not much of a battle. The invading armies do not even have time to fire off a round before they are slaughtered by the hosts of heaven.

Notice John's overview of this coming battle. Look at verses 17-18.

And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle.

Then another angel, the one who has power over fire, came out from the altar; and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, saying, "Put in your sharp sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, because her grapes are ripe."

Jesus Christ is the true vine (John 15:1) and all who belong to Him are safe as contrasted to these who are attached – as you may have noticed – to the vine of the earth. They belong to the antichrist – and he is the wrong vine.^{xi}

Now the reference to this angel having authority over fire is referring back to chapter 8 when an angel took a censer full of fire and threw it onto the earth, initiating great judgment. This is the same angel.

Since he comes from the altar (verse 18), this angel then is uniquely associated with the prayers of the martyrs who have been calling from the presence of the altar before the throne of God,

. . . "How long, O Lord, . . . will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10)

The prayer of these martyrs is about to be answered.

This angel moves into action with his sickle, effectively releasing the power of God upon the enemy armies that are now marching to destroy Jerusalem. Notice verse 19.

So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God.

Can you imagine the fullest meaning of their doom?

By the way, the function of angels as punishers of unbelievers is a theme in other passages of the New Testament.^{xii}

John implies in chapter 20 that after the final judgment, all of the unbelieving world will be thrown into the lake of fire – perhaps thrown in by the angels themselves.

At this battle, we see the vengeance of God unleashed against the enemies of His people.

God's justice demands this. His holy wrath demands full payment for those who have tormented His sons and daughters and mercilessly abused the saints.

The immediate context in this verse is the vindication of Tribulation martyrs. The larger context will be the vindication of every martyr who ever lived, beginning with Able who was killed for his obedience to God by his brother Cain. The first murder in human history was martyrdom.

I have read about, but not seen, a collection of Bibles from the sixteenth century, well into the Reformation period that I referred to earlier in which unbelievers tortured and martyred those who claimed faith in Christ alone. These Bibles are literally stained with blood. Forensic tests have been conducted on these Bibles and have confirmed that these dark stains on every page are human blood. Whose blood?

History answers this question. When Mary, the daughter of King Henry the VIII, ruled England, she was nicknamed Bloody Mary. She terrorized Protestant Christians, murdering as many as she could. Her soldiers would spill the blood of a Christian who would not renounce their faith, then take the believer's own Bible and dip it into the pool of blood, thus staining its pages with the actual blood of the martyred Christian.

A few of these Bibles have been preserved and they are known as Martyrs' Bibles.^{xiii}

The reign of Bloody Mary is child's play compared to the reign of the antichrist and his murdering rampage against those who come to faith in Jesus Christ alone. And God finally moves to answer the prayer of the martyr.

The battle will take place about sixty miles north of Jerusalem near Mount Megiddo. We are even told in verse 20 how far the blood of the defeated soldiers will flow as a river of blood. Notice this verse.

And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses' bridles, for a distance of two hundred miles.

This terminology suggests a sea of blood resulting from a direct confrontation on the field of battle. The depth of blood and the land area covered are statistics that tell us the staggering amount of blood loss from millions of soldiers who come against the remnant of God.^{xiv}

The antichrist and all his followers are now destroyed in this great Battle of Armageddon.

Ezekiel's description of this battle informs us that it will take seven years to get rid of all the weapons massed in this region and it will take seven months to bury the dead (Ezekiel 39:8-16).

This kind of devastation is hard to imagine, is it not? However, Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, described the earlier destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in A.D. 70 with these words: The Roman soldiers filled the streets with dead bodies and made the whole city run down with blood, to such a degree indeed that fires of many of the houses were actually extinguished by the flow of blood.^{xv}

John uses the imagery of a wine press in which grapes were trampled underfoot and the juice flowed to a lower vat where it was collected. Millions of people will be crushed and God, in His holy wrath, will drain the enemy's blood to flow at a height of four feet for two hundred miles.

Think about the irony of this scene. These people have rejected the blood of Jesus Christ, which flowed freely for them as He paid the penalty and experienced the wrath of God the Father. Now, because they have rejected His blood, their blood will flow freely as they experience physically the wrath of God and later, eternally, as they are resurrected to judgment and condemned to hell forever. This is horrific, crushing wrath from God.

This is a picture of hopelessness for those who have chosen to follow the antichrist and a picture of the coming judgment for all who refuse to worship the one true and living God.

We know what is on the other side of death; we now know something of the wrath of God and there is no escaping the Grim Reaper and all his effects apart from faith in Christ.

Peter Marshall often told the legend of the Middle Eastern servant who went to the market to purchase food for his master's household. The servant turned a corner in the market place and came face to face with the Grim Reaper. As the Grim Reaper, wearing the black hood over his face, raised his bony hand and his sickle, the servant turned and ran, terrified that Death had come for him. He ran to his master and begged to be allowed to take a horse and flee for a few days to the nearby village of Samara where some friends lived. His master agreed.

The servant raced to the village and his master went to the market place to purchase the food himself. The master turned the same corner and came face to face with the Grim Reaper. The Reaper seemed uninterested in him, so he boldly asked, "Why did you threaten my servant?"

The Reaper asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well," the master responded, "you raised your sickle to strike him dead and he ran for his life."

The Grim Reaper said, "Oh, him. No, I raised my hand in surprise, wondering why I would meet him in this village. You see, I have an appointment with him tonight in the village of Samara."

Now most people who try to escape the Grim Reaper do not flee on horses, but humanity has attempted different ways to escape the reality of sin and death.

Some get buried in a church. Some think it is enough to join one.

God is not as interested in where we are buried or what we have joined as He is in where our trust is located.

Before she died several years ago, in a moment of surprising openness on television, Ms. Laski, a well known secular humanist and novelist – and no friend to Christians in general or the gospel – said, "What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me."^{xvi}

For those who have placed their faith, hope, and trust in Jesus Christ, there is nothing to fear. You have been, you are presently being, and you will forever be forgiven.

. . . [God] is faithful and just to forgive us . . . and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:9)

The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses – the tense means "continually cleanses us". This is important because we are continually doing unrighteous things and thinking unrighteous thoughts. So, His blood is continually, actively cleansing those who have admitted their sin and come to the cross for forgiveness (I John 1:7).

Let the text in Revelation deliver not only an invitation to the cross, but a warning to all who refuse the blood of Christ to cleanse them; who, instead, attempt to cleanse themselves some other way.

Jesus Christ is either your Great Redeemer or He may soon become your Grim Reaper.

. . . the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

We who believe have a Savior – we have in Him, someone to forgive us; someone whose blood was shed on Calvary's cross to completely pay the penalty for all our sin.

We who believe have a great Savior.

<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Grim+Reaper>.

ⁱⁱ “In Madagascar, Digging Up the Dead Divides Families,” The Wall Street Journal (Oct. 10, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ Dotson Rader, “I Want to Go On Forever,” Parade Magazine (Dec. 9, 2007), pp. 6-8.

^{iv} John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 2000), p. 111.

^v Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans: God’s Last Word (Zondervan, 1971), p. 274.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1995), p. 219.

^{viii} John Phillips, Exploring Revelation (Loizeaux Brothers, 1991), p. 185.

^{ix} Thomas, p. 108.

^x MacArthur, p. 114.

^{xi} Daymond R. Duck and Larry Richards, The Smart Guide to the Bible: Revelation (Thomas Nelson, 2006), p. 216.

^{xii} Thomas, p. 221.

^{xiii} John MacArthur, Truth Matters (Thomas Nelson, 2004), p. 10.

^{xiv} Thomas, p. 224.

^{xv} David Jeremiah, Escape the Coming Night: Volume 3 (Turning Point Study Guide, 1994), p. 86.

^{xvi} John Stott, “The Contemporary Christian,” Christianity Today, vol. 38, no. 7.