

Persecution... the new normal
Rev 4:1-8:1, John 15:18-20

Well brothers and sisters, do you think about heaven and what it will be like?

Popular opinion seems to think of heaven as a place where you live on fluffy clouds, you're dressed in white, and you get a set of wings, maybe a halo and a harp as well – and perhaps your own man-servant who comes with an endless supply of Philadelphia cream cheese.

Or, heaven is the setting for all those jokes where someone dies, and finds themselves standing before St. Peter at the Pearly Gates...

Or maybe you're fascinated by what Colton Burpo describes in his book "Heaven is for Real" where this little boy shares his incredible vision of being in heaven from a near death experience.

What is heaven like? It's certainly a question that many people – especially us in North America – often wonder and speculate about.

But for many Christians, who are being persecuted because of their faith, heaven is not something for speculating on – it's a reality they count on as they may have to follow Christ to the death.

And as we've seen media reports of gruesome executions of Christians by ISIS and other Islamist groups – I'm sure you wonder as I do - why doesn't Christ step in and prevent this!?

And I'm sure you feel, as I do, the urge to retaliate and you are glad that military action is being taken against such groups.

And maybe as you see all this happening - you are asking yourself "*what in the world is going on?*"

Brothers and sisters in order to shed some light on these issues of heaven, persecution and what is happening in our

world – we’re going to read the 2nd of John’s seven visions in the book of Revelation this morning, and I’ve provided it for you on an insert in your bulletin. Let’s read this...

So, this is the second of seven visions given to John which make up the book of Revelation – and as you can see this 2nd vision deals with heaven, persecution and God’s intervention.

And while there are lots of details in with regards to the vision of heaven I need to say from the start that these details aren’t given for us to settle our speculations about what we will wear in heaven, or if we all get harps, or what God might look like... but rather the details of what John sees in heaven are meant to communicate something specific to us.

Specifically it’s meant to give the church – us – a vivid and compelling vision of what we are to be reflecting in our work and worship on earth until Christ returns and makes our reflection of the Kingdom Heaven an actual concrete unending reality here in this world.

This is Jesus showing us a glimpse of what we are praying for when we say *“your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* (Matt 6:10)

And until Christ returns to make that a reality – His church is to be an example of this – no matter what the rest of the world thinks about it, or how they respond to it...

Now, there are a couple of things I want to draw your attention to.

First – with regards to the Throne, if you go and read the first vision in Rev 1-3 you’ll notice it ends with Christ’s address to the church in Laodemia, and Christ promises *“to Him who overcomes I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne”* (Rev 3:21)

And now notice that the second vision starts with a focus on the Throne in Heaven, so we see that the Throne provides the transition from the first vision to the second.

And as you go through each of the 7 visions in Revelation – there is always symbol or a theme that ends one vision and provides the transition into the next.

And all of these 7 visions cover the same time period – between the first coming of Christ to his second coming, the time between times. But they are different from each other in that they frame it from different perspectives and reveal progressively more about what is going on during this time.

So the transition from the first vision to the second is the symbol of the throne and it sets us up to review the time between times once again but this time from the perspective of what it looks like to worship the one true God, and also to understand why we worship the Lamb of God.

Now the second thing I want to draw your attention to is the scroll. In the second vision the scroll with the seven seals upon it function as the catalyst for plot development.

Once John sees the scroll things begin to develop – the question is raised “*who can open the scroll?*”

But no one worthy to open it is found in heaven, earth or under the earth. In other words there is no one with the right qualifications to implement the remainder of God’s plan for human history – so John weeps uncontrollably... Why?

Because if God’s covenant plans remain unfulfilled; then all His covenant promises of restoration, the destruction of the serpent and his line, and the renewal of the earth will not happen.

If God’s covenant for restoring this world cannot be fulfilled – then we have no hope! So John weeps because no one can be found... but wait!

It turns out that the Root of David, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb who has been slain – in other words Jesus Christ, the Christ of the Covenants is found to be worthy to open the scroll.

So as Christ fulfills all of God's covenant promises and intentions – and because He is worthy to open the scroll and bring God's covenant plans to fulfillment! the Lamb is now included in the focus of the heavenly worship.

Suddenly John sees the Lamb appear at the center, on the Throne – which can only mean one thing... The Lamb is also God.

Because in heaven only God is worshiped- no matter how impressive any other spiritual being might be, like the four living creatures which John sees... only God is worshiped.

So, it is a powerful confirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ for John to see the Lamb standing in the center of the throne – and to see all of heaven worship the Lamb.

And for us too friends – because in this time between times many people can accept that Jesus was a historical figure, a revolutionary rabbi, a good teacher, maybe even a prophet...

But the 2nd vision reveals that Jesus is actually God and that all heaven bows down to worship him – so we are right to bow to Jesus as well – and to no other!

But here's where the 2nd Vision begins to take us deeper... once the Lamb is proclaimed worthy to open the scroll, it's not just heaven that celebrates and worships, John also hears every creature in heaven and earth, and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them singing in worship to the Lamb. (Rev 4:13)

Why? Friends remember what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:19-21

"For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."

The creation is anticipating its liberation from decay as the remainder of God's plan for Human history is implemented, and thus it sings praise to the Lamb on the Throne.

So, the Lamb takes God's plan for the time between times and He begins to implement it by opening the first seal.

And John sees the first of the now-infamous four-horsemen of the Apocalypse appear... but the first horse and rider are not actually infamous because they represent Christ as the Conquering King going in the world, through His Church, to re-establish God's good rule in this world... on earth as it is in Heaven.

Remember our Lord said to Peter *"upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hell shall not stand against it"* (Matt 16:18) The church is to go out and conquer.

And how else would the Lamb begin to implement the remainder of God's plan for the creation... than through those whom He purchased for God by his blood, and whom He has

made to be a Kingdom and priests to serve God, and who will reign on the earth..." (Rev 4:9-10)

So the white horse and rider of the first seal represent any and all instances during the time between times where Christ, through His Church is at work establishing the Kingdom of Heaven in this world.

Now we might think that this activity would result in a better world, a more peaceful world, a world where people love each other but in fact friends the time between times will be characterized more often than not by the kind of turmoil that comes forth from the second seal.

Remember our Lord said to the disciples *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."* (Matt 10:34) and in the 1st Vision in the book of Revelation Jesus encourages his church to stay faithful amidst persecution... even unto death.

So brothers and sisters the rider on the red horse represents conflict, war. What we see here is that whenever the Church goes out as the Ambassadors of Christ – riding of as a conqueror bent on conquest - it is in fact a clash between kingdoms – it is war!

And while it is primarily a spiritual battle, as Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12 *“we battle not against flesh and blood...”* the truth of the matter revealed in this Vision is that this spiritual battle will have some flesh and blood casualties.

So the red horse and rider of the second seal represent any and all instances during the time between times when the church’s work is violently and vociferously opposed.

But there are others ways to oppose and persecute the church.

Instead of simply violently threatening believers – you can pressure them economically, making it extremely difficult to get the basic necessities of life to attempt to stop the Church

from expanding. Or even more effective – persuade them to pursue riches instead of God’s Kingdom.

And the so the black horse and rider come forward, and what John sees and hears – the merchant scales and the comments about the prices of wheat and barley, oil and wine – indicates the third seal represents economic persecution.

Essentially the prices for basic foods like wheat and barley go up exponentially, you can barely afford to feed yourself with your basic wage – however luxury items like oil and wine are plentiful and unaffected.

So the black horse and rider of the third seal represents any and all circumstances in the time between times where the unbelievers get richer and the Christians get poorer... because of economic policies or laws which discriminate against Christians because we refuse to do business in a way that dishonors our Lord or does not steward the creation that we are supposed to be liberating.

Now the end result of violent opposition and economic persecution is of course somewhat predictable – many Christians will lose their livelihood and their lives.

So when the fourth seal is broken and Death emerges riding a pale horse with Hades following we should not be surprised.

After all this is a war between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Empires of this earth who refuse to bow down in worship to the Lamb and the One on the Heavenly Throne.

Brother and sisters we are being prepared to deal with the fact that some believers will lose their livelihood and their lives in this conflict during the time between times.

Thus when the fifth seal is opened John sees the souls of some of these casualties – except they are not really casualties.

Their located under an altar implies that they have literally sacrificed their lives for the Kingdom of Heaven in the face of persecution - so they are martyrs

And their sacrifice cries out for vengeance – after all to kill those who bow to the Ruler of Heaven is to thumb your nose at Him and mock His ability to protect those who are faithful to Him – and so the martyrs call out *“How long until judgment comes and we are avenged?”*

The answer comes back that they must wait a little longer – until the number of their fellow brothers and sisters who were to be killed, as they had been, is completed...

Now congregation - these are troubling words to hear because it reveals to us that the Lamb and the One who sits on the Throne have pre-determined who will lose their lives to persecution. And that really rattles our sense of following Christ because he our source of blessing and safety and protection...

However if we remember that our own salvation was purchased through Christ sacrificing his life as our substitute – it is only fitting that Christ would call us to be willing to lay down our lives as His witnesses...

Remember Jesus said that we would be his “witnesses” (Acts 1:8) and the Greek word for witness is... “*martyr*.”

You see friends - over and over again in this time between times the blood of the martyrs has watered the seed of the gospel planted in the hearts of those who had persecuted Christians so that they eventually became part of the very church they had persecuted – just like the apostle Paul.

So John sees that those who serve Christ’s Kingdom in this way are held in honor in heaven.

They are given white robes to wear as they wait for the completion of persecution of the Church in the time between times which will lead to God’s judgment on those who opposed His Kingdom and his people.

So when the Lamb opens the sixth seal – John see a brief vision of that Day of Judgment when Christ will return, described using the typical Old Testament symbols of that day – the sun turning black, the moon turning red, the stars falling

from the sky... in other words the Creator is undoing His creation, in order to make it new once again.

And all those who opposed God’s Kingdom in any manner during this time – kings, princes, generals, the rich, the mighty, slave and free – the 99% and the 1%, they all realize that judgment is about to be pronounced upon them.

But while the sixth seal introduces this Day of Judgment - it doesn’t linger and dwell on it – only six verses are given to describe it.

And what this says to us friends is that now is not the time to gloat over the coming destruction of those who have persecuted God’s people – who have and will persecute us.

Instead the Vision quickly moves on and all of chapter seven is focused on God’s decision to save his people during the time between times and celebrating that salvation – because many of those who formerly persecuted God’s people have now become a part of them.

Remember... our Lord said *"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"* (Matt 5:44)

So, in the 2nd Vision – in the Sixth seal there occurs a symbolic pause before the final judgment is released, described in 7:1-3 where four angels hold the four winds back from blowing on the earth.

However, please understand - this does not mean that there will be some sort of pause that occurs before Christ's return... as has been popularized in American dispensational rapture and tribulation theology.

The pause occurs in this "vision" in order to help us re-focus on the fact that God *"is slow to anger and abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion"* (Num 14:18) and that the Sovereign Lord says *"Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"* (Ez 18:23)

So the good news is that while not all Christians will survive the persecution that will occur in the time between times, all of those in Christ - a great multitude from every tribe and tongue and nation - will survive that Day of Judgment! Because through Jesus Christ they have been marked as belonging to the people of God – they were given the seal of God on their forehead.

A great multitude - represented by the number 1000; made up of all those who trusted God's promise of forgiveness and salvation under the Old Covenant from the 12 tribes of Israel - that now includes all those who will believe because of the witness of the 12 disciples.

Thus the symbolic number of the entire people of God that spans not only the time between times, but the entire existence of creation is 144 000.

And John sees this massive crowd standing now standing before the throne and the Lamb – and they are worshipping!

So we are back to where the Vision began, with everything and everyone is centered around the Lamb and the Throne – and God’s plan for the remainder of human history has been completed and it is now on earth, as it is in heaven!

And so we come to the end of the 2nd Vision friends - all that remains to be opened is the seventh seal, but as I said that is the symbol which will lead us into the 3rd Vision and that’s for next week.

Today, may the Holy Spirit seal the message from the 2nd vision about how we are to live between Christ’s first coming and his second coming upon our hearts and minds so that it works out in our attitudes and actions.

May He cause this vision of Heaven to come alive for us so that it is reflected in our life together as a church – to witness it to the world.

May He cause it to direct our mission into our community – causing us to reclaim everything and everyone and reform it,

and reorient them so their lives honor the Lamb and the One on the Throne and they bow down in worship.

And may the Holy Spirit also reminds us – vividly - that victory in this conquest does not come through arrogance, presumption, brute force, persuasive argument, or clever strategies but it happens because of God’s sovereign choice... and through persevering amidst persecution, to the point of sacrifice.

And ultimately brother and sister may the Holy Spirit assures us through this vision, that one day we will be in that multitude singing “Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the Throne – and, unto the Lamb...

So, let us anticipate singing with the saints in the New Creation by singing together now, giving Praise and glory, wisdom and thanks, honor and power and strength to our God forever. Visibly demonstrating on earth - as it will be in Heaven. Amen
Let us pray.