

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

Friends, when you think about heaven, what do you think it will be like?

Popular opinion seems to think of heaven as a place where you live in 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 going to heaven in a near death experience.

What is heaven like? Certainly a question that many people – especially us – often wonder and speculate about.

So, this morning as we hear what Apostle John saw in his vision of heaven – the second of seven visions that make up the book of Revelation – I'm sure there is some comparing and contrasting going on – between what He saw and whatever other notions of heaven we might have.

We're thinking – ok John makes reference to white robes, and harps – and the crowns could easily be halos - and last week in the other vision there was a reference to Philadelphia... but where does cream cheese fit into all this???

Seriously though– while there is a lot of detail in John's vision of heaven that we can compare –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... the details of what John sees in heaven are meant to communicate something specific.

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 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)*

Now, instinctively we should know that having heaven on earth does not mean eventually we will only wear white robes and play the harp – instead it means that everyone and everything in this world would become centered around and focused upon worshiping the Almighty upon His Throne – just like it is in heaven – in this vision which John sees.

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 remember the first vision ends with the letter to the church in Laodecia where Christ gives this promise *“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 the second vision starts with a focus on the Throne in Heaven – the symbol of the Throne provides a transition from the first vision to the second.

And as we go through each subsequent vision – there is a symbol or a theme that ends one vision and provides the transition into the next. They are kind of like a computer icon that you “double click” and it opens up another window of information - which is the next vision.

So as one vision ends there is a symbol which moves us forward into the next parallel vision - in which the same time period - from the first coming to the second coming - is covered again... but on a deeper level of understanding and from a different perspective.

So the transition from the first vision to the second is the throne...

and from the second to the third it is the seventh seal, from the third to the fourth it is old testament imagery, from the fourth to the fifth is it God's wrath, but we're going too far ahead...

All we need to understand here is that as we moving by means of the symbol of the throne from the first vision to the second one - to review the time between times once again in order to gain a more comprehensive and compelling vision 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. The scroll with the seven seals upon it is the catalyst for plot development in this vision.

Once John sees the scroll things begin to develop – the question is raised “who can open the scroll?” But no one

worthy can be found to open it or even look inside it.... 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 plan remained unfulfilled; the promise of a coming day when God's people would be restored and their enemies would be judged and the earth would be renewed, that promised day will not happen.

Friends if God's plan for restoring this world cannot be completed – then we have no hope!

So John weeps... 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, because of his connection to God's people and the work he accomplished in his first coming, is found worthy to open the scroll.

So because of this – the Lamb and His achievements are now included in the focus of the heavenly worship, the Lamb is

included 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... only God is worshiped.

So, it is a powerful experience of confirmation 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 of revelation reveals to us that Jesus is actually God Almighty 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... and on a side note – I need to say that Apocalypse doesn't really mean destruction – it's just the Greek word for Revelation.

But the first horse and rider are not infamous, in actuality 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 in the time between times where Christ is at work in this world establishing the Kingdom of Heaven through his Church.

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 Jesus encourages his church to stay faithful amidst persecution... even unto death.

Friends the rider on the red horse represents conflict... war... so 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 the spiritual battle will have some flesh and blood causalities.

So the red horse and rider of the second seal represent any and all instances in the time between times when the church’s work is opposed violently and believers lose their lives.

But there are others ways to persecute the church. Instead of simply killing off believers – you can pressure them economically and perhaps the appeal for wealth or making it extremely difficult to get the basic necessities of life will stop the Church from expanding.

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 that discriminate against us or 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 lives.

So when the fourth seal is broken and Death emerges riding a pale horse we should not be surprised really – 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, and so we are being prepared to deal with the fact that some believers will lose 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. They are located under with an altar – so the implication is that they have literally sacrificed their lives for the Kingdom of Heaven in the face of persecution.

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...

And friends – 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 lay down our lives as His witnesses... just another side note that 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 those who serve Christ’s Kingdom in this way are honored – they are given white robes to wear as they wait for an end to

the persecution of the Church in the time between times and God's judgment on those who opposed His Kingdom.

And that what John sees when the Lamb opens the sixth seal – 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 – realize the judgment that is about to be pronounced upon them.

But while the sixth seal introduces this day of judgment, it doesn't linger on it – now is not the time to gloat over the destruction of those who have persecuted God's people.

Instead the Vision quickly moves on to spend the entirety of chapter seven focusing on all those whom God has chosen to

save during the time between times and celebrating that salvation – because many of those who 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 a symbolic pause occurs before the final judgment is released. However, please understand - this does not mean that there will be some sort of pause that occurs before Christ's return...

The pause occurs only 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 there is a great multitude from every tribe and tongue and nation who will survive that Day of

Judgment because 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 worshiping!

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 - mark it well!

May the Holy Spirit seal its message upon our hearts and minds so that it works out in our attitudes and actions.

Because it sets forth an image of the Kingdom of Heaven for us to reflect in our life together as a church.

It directs our mission into this world – to reclaim everything it and reform it so it honors the Lamb and the One on the Throne.

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

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

So, we give Praise and glory, wisdom and thanks honor and power and strength be to our God forever – Amen!

So the as the 2nd Vision ends friends – and as it does the Lamb opens the seventh seal... to carries us forward into the next vision, for another look at what to expect in the time between times until Christ returns.

Let us pray.