

“REVELATION: DOES IT DESCRIBE OUR DAYS?” SERIES

#9: “Chapter 4”

INTRO:

With this chapter, we start the second description of the church age (or Christian dispensation). The previous section, the letters to the seven churches, provided the first description by showing us the many characteristics of the church during its existence. From the letters to the seven churches, we understand that all seven types of churches will exist in the church age and that in any given time a congregation may resemble any one of the seven.

Let’s read this chapter. Follow along in whatever version you have. I’ll be reading from the English Standard Version.

(Read chapter 4.)

This section, chapters 4-7, focuses on the tribulation and the persecution the church faces throughout its existence.

The first thing to notice is in verse 1: ***“I will show you what must take place after this.”***

“WHAT MUST TAKE PLACE” IS PERSECUTION.

“After this” is referring to John’s receiving of the revelation. In other words, ***“the first voice”*** is going to tell John what’s going to start happening to the church very soon.

We know from our knowledge of history that from the church’s beginning, Christians were victims of the Jewish “cancel” culture. Their businesses were boycotted to the point that they found it difficult to *stay* in business. They were barred from the trade guilds. They became society’s outcasts. Their children were barred from Jewish schools.

Christians were treated horribly by the Roman government most of the time. Wikipedia gives us this:

“The persecution of Christians can be historically traced from the first century of the Christian era to the present day. Christian missionaries and converts to Christianity have both been targeted for persecution, sometimes to the point of being martyred for their faith, ever since the emergence of Christianity. Since the emergence of Christian states in Late Antiquity, Christians have also been persecuted by other Christians due to differences in doctrine which have been declared heretical.

“Early Christians were persecuted for their faith at the hands of both the Jews, from whose religion Christianity arose, and the Romans who controlled many of the lands across which early Christianity was spread in the Roman Empire. Early in the fourth century, the empire’s official persecutions were ended by the Edict of Serdica and

the practice of Christianity legalized by the Edict of Milan. Shortly thereafter, Christians began persecuting each other. The schisms of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages – including the Rome – Constantinople schisms and the many Christological controversies – together with the later Protestant Reformation provoked severe conflicts between Christian denominations. During these conflicts, members of the various denominations frequently persecuted each other and engaged in sectarian violence. In the 20th century, Christian populations were persecuted, sometimes to the point of genocide, by various states, including the Ottoman Empire and its successor, which committed the Hamidian massacres, the Armenian Genocide, the Assyrian Genocide, and the Greek Genocide, and officially atheist states such as the Soviet Union, Communist Albania, and North Korea.

“The persecution of Christians has continued into the 21st century. Since Christianity is the largest world religion, its adherents live across the globe. Approximately 10% of the world's Christians are minorities who live in non-Christian-majority states. The contemporary persecution of Christians includes the persecution of Christians by Christians and the persecution of Christians by ISIL and other terrorist groups, with official state persecution mostly occurring in countries which are located in Africa and Asia because they have state religions or because their governments and societies practice religious favoritism which is accompanied by religious discrimination and religious persecution, as well as in currently or formerly communist countries.

“According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2020 report, Christians in Burma, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Vietnam are persecuted; these countries are labelled ‘countries of particular concern’ by the United States Department of State, because of their governments' engagement in, or toleration of, ‘severe violations of religious freedom’.

“Much of the persecution of Christians is undertaken by non-state actors which are labelled ‘entities of particular concern’ by the U.S. State Department, including the Islamist groups Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Houthi movement in Yemen, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province in Pakistan, al-Shabaab in Somalia, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, as well as the United Wa State Army and participants in the Kachin conflict in Burma.”

Needless to say, where Islam rules, Christians suffer. Where atheism rules, Christians suffer.

The second thing I notice is in verses 2 through 8, where John is assured that...

GOD IS ON THE THRONE OF THE UNIVERSE.

Hendriksen comments:

*“Whenever in history the church is faithful to its calling and bears testimony concerning the truth, tribulation is bound to follow. Aside even from this fact, the church is **in** the world. Hence, it suffers along with the world. Children of God do not escape the horrors of war, famine, and pestilence. The church needs these tribulations. It*

needs both the direct antagonism of the world and participation in the common woes that pertain to this earthly life as a result of sin. The church, to, is sinful. It is in constant need of purification and sanctification.

“These tribulations, therefore, are employed by our Lord as an instrument for our own spiritual advancement” (p. 99).

All the while, though, God is in control. God is on the throne. God rules.

Even though what John was shown as he was once again **“in the Spirit”** was not literal and physical, it was a *vision* that he was allowed to see that expressed the important spiritual truth: God rules!

But what about the **“twenty-four elders”** that sit on twenty-four thrones? Who could they be? I believe they represent those who pay homage to God – the faithful from the Patriarchal and Mosaic Ages and from the Christian Age. In other words, they represent the entire host of the redeemed.

The **“seven torches of fire”** symbolize the Holy Spirit. The **“sea of glass”** corresponds to the laver of water just outside the ancient temple and represents the cleansing, purifying blood of the Lamb of God.

But who are the **“four living creatures”**? Ezekiel speaks of the same four creatures in chapters one and ten. He reveals that they are **“the cherubim.”** Why should they be anything else here? But what are “cherubim”? They’re a very high order of angels, just under the Seraphim. Satan, or Lucifer, was once a cherub.

What a blessing this message is to suffering Christians. It pleases me to see it repeated by faithful Christians in the various avenues of social media. I see it on Facebook almost every day: “God is still in control!”

The Chinese Communists don’t control our destiny! Putin doesn’t control our destiny! President Biden doesn’t control our destiny! Our destiny is in the hands of the Creator God of the universe!!! Amen? Amen!

IN CLOSING:

I offer this word of caution: To say that **“God is in control”** or **“Our destiny is in His hands”** does not mean that we believe everything that happens is His will. He doesn’t control us; He doesn’t give us free will and then take it away from us. Much of what happens to us and to those around us and around the world is the result of human decision and human error. Sometimes we’re perpetrators and sometimes we’re victims of perpetrators. Sin has caused so many bad things to happen.

In fact, God is so good about causing **“all things (to) to work together for good”** (Romans 8:28). Someone has suggested that instead of saying, “God is in control,” we should say “God is always good; He is always able to bring good from any situation as we put our trust in him.”

Will you do that today?