

REVELATION 4-5

In 2-3, we were introduced to the specific churches most immediately addressed by Revelation. But the struggles and issues faced by these churches touch on realities much broader and deeper to the human condition in a conflicted and fearful world.

The churches praise or criticism depends on their relationship and fidelity to Christ. Will they conquer and overcome? Are they ready for the coming crisis?

Some are facing external pressures – from fellow Jews who wish them harm (Smyrna & Philadelphia), but ultimately from the state (e.g., Pergamum, where the seat of Satan is). Others have been facing the threat of false teaching to which some believers have faithfully resisted, but which others have largely capitulated (Pergamum & Thyatira). Several reflect internal weaknesses that indicate they are ill-prepared for the coming crisis: their first love has faded (Ephesus), they compromise with false teaching (Thyatira), they are living an illusion (Sardis), they have capitulated to the popular culture (Laodicea).

Both encouragement and warning is the message...

In times of crisis, we look to find some hope in the future, but also the kind of hope that helps us live with courage and inner strength in the present. The vision John is given to see in Chaps. 4-5 may be a vision of ‘what must take place after this,’(4:1), but it is the kind of vision given to persecuted churches and Christians in order to help them live in the present. Even as they were surrounded by hostility and insecurity, they were transported by John to a different place, a place ‘in the spirit’ in which they could see how deeply they were surrounded by the heavenly host. Even as they were trapped and discouraged by the circumstances of their lives, they could see that God, the angels, the lamb, the elders, and the faithful were part of an eternal reality transcending time and space.

The vision of the heavenly court is not unique to Revelation. In Job (1-2) we are given a vision of God as some great monarch surrounded by heavenly courtiers who execute God’s orders.

In Isaiah 6, we are given a vision where the Jerusalem temple’s holiest room suddenly springs to life. Cherubim were statues of winged creatures which stood behind the ark of the covenant (housing the 10 commandments - Exodus 25: 10-22). In Isaiah’s vision (6:1-8), the cherubim became ‘seraphim’, a pun on the Hebrew word for fire. These were now fiery statues come to life, flying back and forth across the room, calling out to one another ‘holy, holy, holy...’ the room fills with smoke and shakes like an earthquake at their call.

In Ezekiel, however, we encounter the most extravagant vision of all (Chapter 1). Ezekiel had been a Jerusalem Temple priest who had been taken to exile in Babylon. In his vision the cherubim were now 4-faced creatures with eyes on every side. They flew on wheels spinning within wheels, which let them move in any direction without having to turn around. Over their heads on outstretched wings was the dome of heaven and above the dome, a sapphire-like throne, with a brilliant human-like being, surrounded by rainbow colours as far

as the eye could see.

Revelation takes up the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel and expands them. The 4-faced, winged creatures with eyes on every side (Ezekiel) sing praises to God who sits enthroned (Isaiah), but in John's vision they sing day and night without ceasing 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come'. Their song adds a dimension of past present and future - all of it is under the sovereign rule of Almighty God. Therefore, the faithful need not be afraid, their vindication is coming. Their peace is secure. The fulfilment of their eternal destiny will not be thwarted by the puny designs of circumstances beyond their control or earthly rulers who want to hurt them.

The 24 elders represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the church. Both Old and New Testaments, the covenant to Israel and the renewed covenant to the new Israel, are contained in the vision. All belongs to God and all serve God's will and purpose.

In the midst of this glorious heavenly vision, however, the plight of ordinary believers in the 7 churches are not forgotten or neglected. There are 7 torches or lamps that burn constantly before the throne of God, and there are seven spirits corresponding to the seven churches to whom the revelation is given. The Lamb who is worthy to open the scroll of the future has 7 horns and 7 watchful eyes (which represent the 7 spirits sent out into the world). The Lamb that holds the future in his hands is a slaughtered lamb, reflecting the violence and persecution faced by the churches. Their fate has been taken on by the Lamb and yet the Lamb is also the conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah. Suffering and tears will come to an end. Victory, vindication, peace, and joy will be the eternal inheritance.

The Lamb is not only slaughtered, but it is also by nature weak and vulnerable. In this vision, the Lamb represents both the weakness and vulnerability of the persecuted as well as the victory of God over the very rule of evil which is the cause of the persecution. Vindication awaits the faithful of God who do not give in to evil by hatred, violence, bitterness, and despair in response to the evil done to them.

But the lamb is also a symbol of hope to the defeated Christians. However deeply Christians may falter and fail, the Lamb's 'blood' is symbolic of the 'ransom' won for them. The blood represents liberation and cleansing from, as well as victory over, sin and evil. There are no depths of failure and falling from which God cannot save us, and no suffering or hurt through which the Lamb cannot carry us.

Salvation is universal 'from every language and tribe and people and nation', and it is assured no matter what happens here on earth right now. Even though there is judgement and threat in Revelation, the larger vision is of a vast array of people from all over who will be included in "the new heavens and the new earth." If this is a hopeful vision for you, then you are one of the included. Those who are excluded will exclude themselves by refusing to open their hearts to love... More to come on all that...