

He Reigns

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you've had major perspective changes in life. I'm sure you have. Well, I've had a few, and this is one of them.

In Indonesia, I grew up in an upper middle class family. I went to school full of rich, super rich kids. So I would often complain to my dad, Dad, why are we not as rich as they are?

And my dad would often say, Don't always look to the people who are richer than you. Sometimes you have to realize that there are a lot more people who are a lot less fortunate than you are.

So be thankful. But of course, for a teenager, those words did not help. I kept complaining over and over again.

Until one day, my school sent all of the students from my class to live in a small, poor village for a week. We had to stay in the locals' houses.

[1 : 10] So my friend Eric and I stayed in this small house that had brick walls without plaster or paint, just plain bricks.

The ground was just uncovered dirt. No tiles, carpets, or floorboards, just dirt. Eric and I, two teenage boys, we had to share one single bed for a week.

The only bathroom was in the backyard. And it was made of wooden walls without any roof. So you can imagine if you had to go out to pee in the middle of the night, what's that like?

Well, it's a bit scary. There was no kitchen. They had to cook in the backyard. And I remember we were watching chickens running around and pooping while we were eating chicken.

But we had to eat everything, right? Because it was hard for those people to afford food. That's when my perspective changed.

[2 : 16] Not because of my dad's words, but because I saw the reality. Seeing means experiencing. And it changed my perspective to the point that, until now, I can't leave food uneaten.

Because when I see uneaten food, I think about those unfortunate people. Now, that's what the book of Revelation does.

Revelation puts theology, which is usually taught in words, into images. The book of Revelation was written to Christians who were persecuted, and those persecuted Christians needed more than words.

They needed to see and experience the perspective of heaven. That's what Revelation is about, and we can see that in the first few verses of this passage.

So, the book of Revelation is written in the form of a letter. And in this passage, the writer, John, opens his letter by explaining the nature of the Revelation.

[3 : 28] And so, in verse 1, we read that this Revelation is from Jesus, from Jesus Christ, but also from God, the Revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him.

So, in a sense, there are two sources of the Revelation here. God, through Jesus, to the angel, to John, to the servants.

And so, in a sense, there are two sources, but the two are actually one. Because throughout Revelation, Jesus and God are often depicted in unity.

That's why John calls that Revelation that he receives in verse 2, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. But notice that it's one Revelation.

Two sources in one unity. That's whom the Revelation comes from. But whom is this Revelation for? And so, in verse 1, it says, to show his servants.

[4 : 37] That is, those Christians who are persecuted because they serve and follow Jesus. And so, a little bit of historical background.

In the first century, when this letter was written, some Christians were persecuted. Sometimes they were persecuted by the Jewish authorities because they followed Jesus and the Jewish people did not like Jesus.

Like the apostles Peter and John in the book of Acts, who were caught and then flogged. And sometimes, in some places, they were persecuted by the Roman government because the Christians were accused of being atheists.

A bit ironic, but they were accused of being atheists. That is, instead of worshipping the gods of the Roman Empire, they worshipped a Jewish man instead.

Or just generally, the Christians were seen as weird, as they refused to take part in social-cultural practices like offering sacrifices to the gods or going to the circus or theatre for entertainment.

[5 : 53] They were weird. So, they were generally disliked by the society. According to tradition, Ignatius of Antioch, for example, was thrown to lions to be eaten alive.

These sort of things happened a lot during that time. These were the original audience of the Revelation. But we, today, are also included as a secondary audience of this Revelation.

Because in verse 4, John addresses the seven churches in Asia. Well, these were real historical churches in the Roman province of Asia. But the number seven is a symbol.

It's a symbol that denotes completion or fullness. And in this case, it's a figure of speech in which the part is put for the whole.

So, it's like saying Australia won against England in a soccer match. Well, it's actually just 11 Australian players winning against 11 English players in a soccer match.

[7 : 05] But we say we won anyway because the 11 players represent the whole of Australia in that match. And so, here as well, the seven historical churches are viewed as a representative of all the churches, which is in Asia at least, but also by extension the church universal throughout history, including us.

We are also a part of the intended audience of this Revelation, because we too serve and follow Jesus. We are His servants in verse 1.

And we too are sometimes rejected by the society because we follow Jesus. Even though most of the time our persecution is not as extensive as it was for the first century Christians.

I know many Christians in the world today who have suffered persecution because of Jesus. I've told you about a friend of mine whose family was killed because they followed Jesus.

I have a cousin who was a victim of church bombing. She survived but suffered burn injuries in her entire body. She survived. She's not as severe as it was for the first century Christians.

[8 : 32] Here in Australia, persecution is more subtle. A couple of times when my wife and I talked to a stranger, and they asked about what we did for a living.

And when they found out that I was a pastor, either they awkwardly said, Oh! And then just silence. Or they said, Oh, I'm sorry for asking.

And when I was working at City Bible Forum, my goodness, the amount of abuse that I had to face on social media was phenomenal. From Australians.

Australians. People commenting that Christians are stupid, Christianity needs to be outlawed, they wish us complete failure in our work.

They don't say these things out in the open, but when they have the chance to hide behind computers, for example, they show that they too wish that they could persecute Christians, or at least exclude them from the society.

[9 : 51] And so in this country, persecution doesn't usually manifest in violence. It doesn't. But it usually manifests in subtle exclusion. We might be excluded from social gatherings because we're Christians, or conversations just die out because they find out we're Christians.

Or they see us as weird. Or we might lose our jobs. Or people might bully us online or at school, or in our workplace.

Or in our workplace. So what might help us in such situations? John answers, a revelation of the heavenly reality.

And so, if you go back to verse 1. Revelation is given to show his servants what must soon take place. To show them, not only to tell them what will happen, hoping that mere words will suffice to comfort them in the midst of suffering.

No, God showed them. The revelation enabled them to see the perspective of heaven. Heaven was opened, as it were.

[11 : 07] Like it says later in chapter 4. After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, Come up here, and I will show you, not tell you, I will show you what must take place after this.

Heaven was opened like a curtain to enable persecuted Christians to see what's happening behind the scenes. So that these Christians will be reminded of what God is doing behind the scenes in heaven, as they are persecuted here on earth.

So that they will move their focus away from their present suffering on earth, to the heavenly reality where their true home is.

And we today need that too, don't we? We need to see that heavenly reality regularly, to help us live on this earth as servants of Jesus, with the perspective of heaven that comforts us and empowers us, especially when we feel rejected by the society, because we follow Jesus.

And so when we get to verse 3, and we read, Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

[12 : 46] That is, the time of persecution is near, or even already here. Now imagine being those Christians in the first century. Their friends and family have been killed or tortured.

They're running for their lives. And now they're sitting in a church, hearing these words, Blessed are you. They might be thinking, wait, we're blessed?

We're blessed. Are you sure? We today probably don't feel blessed either, every time our friends exclude us, or bully us, because we are Christians.

So how is this a blessing? How are we supposed to take comfort from these words? Well, those Christians are blessed. We are blessed.

Because what is revealed in this book this book will comfort and strengthen every Christian who endures persecution and rejection for the sake of Christ.

- [13 : 57] And so what is the content of this revelation that gives us comfort? We will see that slowly in the next few weeks. But even now, in the next section in the greetings and doxology, we can get some of that comfort and blessing.

Because this section contains big themes that will appear again in the whole book later. So let's take a look at these blessings in the next section.

First, John's greetings remind Christians then and now that the one who gives this revelation is the God who sits on his throne above history.

In the second half of verse 4. Grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne.

This is so important that John states it again at the end of this section in verse 8. God sits on his throne above time and history.

- [15 : 14] Meaning, whatever happens in history, whether there are wars or disasters or sickness or persecutions, God is in control because he still sits on his throne and rules.

This is further emphasized by how the Holy Spirit is depicted here. The seven spirits. Again, seven means complete.

But here, the completeness of the Spirit's work is relevant especially for persecuted Christians. Because the seven spirits are mentioned again in chapter 5.

The lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the world. The Holy Spirit's work here refers to the complete control of God throughout the earth.

As God sends his spirits to every corner of the earth to comfort and empower Christians in all places. Nothing escapes his control and no Christian escapes his comforting power.

- [16 : 33] God's rule is spread across time. He is the one who was and is and is to come, and across space as his Holy Spirit moves throughout the earth.

Here, the persecuted Christians are given a heavenly perspective. Because from the earthly perspective, their suffering is difficult and it feels like it lasts forever.

But from the perspective of heaven, our persecution is local while his rule is universal. And it's temporary while his rule is forever.

Seen from that perspective, although our persecution doesn't magically disappear, it doesn't. But it becomes less significant.

I have a ball of yarn here. It's really long. It's 60 meters long. And, oh, it's tangled. Oh, it's tangled.

- [17 : 43] But if you imagine this ball of yarn as the rule of God, it feels like it lasts forever. And this part here is history.

Our persecution today, now, is just that part there. This is the rule of God. This is the rule of God.

Seen from that perspective, again, our persecution doesn't disappear. But it feels a bit less significant, doesn't it? Second reminder.

Verse 5 reminds us of who Jesus is. And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness. The word witness there also means martyr.

So when he lived on earth, Jesus was a faithful witness to the kingdom of God, despite threats, despite enemies. And in his death, he was a faithful martyr.

- [18 : 54] John gives us another heavenly perspective here. If Jesus, our head, our Lord, lived and died faithfully as he witnessed to the kingdom of God, who are we to expect otherwise?

We, too, need to push through rejections and persecutions and stay faithful to Jesus. And then, he's the firstborn from the dead.

That is, the first one to be raised to eternal life. Thus giving us another heavenly perspective. That if we endure with Jesus, we will be resurrected even if we die as martyrs.

And lastly, in his second coming, Jesus will be the ruler of the kings of the earth. Those governments that are anti-Christian will be demolished because Jesus will rule over all.

Do we have this apocalyptic, heavenly view of God and Jesus when we face rejections and persecutions?

[20 : 16] More often than not, we focus less on who God is in heaven and more on our pain and suffering here on earth. I'm like that, too.

And that's why we need to be reminded constantly of this heavenly perspective. Who God is and who Jesus is.

That's why the book of Revelation is here. It's given for us. Third reminder. The second half of verse 5.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood. The gospel. The good news. John reminds us of what Jesus has done for us.

He has freed us from our sins by his blood. We are forgiven. Meaning, we shall not fear death. Because death is actually just the start of eternal life.

[21 : 24] With complete happiness. There is no more condemnation. That's what Romans 8 says. Author Randy Alcorn says it like this.

For Christians, this present life is the closest they will come to hell. For unbelievers, it is the closest they will come to heaven. To heaven. We don't fear death.

We don't fear death. Because this is the worst that we are going to get. Dying means living. If persecution leads to death, man, we win.

Fourth reminder. Fourth reminder. John reminds us of Jesus calling for us.

In verse 6. And he has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father. To him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

[22 : 30] Remember from Leviticus and 1 Peter. We are called to be a kingdom of priests. We are priests. Here John gives us that reminder too. Of our true heavenly apocalyptic identity.

It's like Clark Kent ripping his clothes to reveal that he is Superman underneath. You might be parents, grandparents, children.

You might be bankers, lawyers, managers, designers. But if you rip all those fleshly identities underneath, you are God's servants.

You are God's children who have inherited the kingdom of God. Even if you die, you will be a billionaire. More than that.

You will have the kingdom of God. And you are priests who are called to represent God to the world even when the world rejects him and persecutes you. We need that reminder.

[23 : 39] And lastly, fifth reminder. John gives us a glimpse of the future in verse 7. Look, he is coming.

Jesus is coming with the clouds. This is a reference to the prophecy in Daniel 7, our first reading. Where there's one like a son of man coming with the clouds and he will reign over all nations on earth.

And then, every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. And all peoples on earth will mourn because of him. This one is a reference to a prophecy in Zechariah 12.

Where in the context, Israel's enemies will be destroyed. And Israel herself will repent and mourn because they have killed a messenger of God.

And so, John uses this passage to say that Jesus is that messenger of God whom you have killed.

[24 : 52] And there is hope for a time when even those who reject Jesus will repent and mourn and will join the people of God. And so, this is a reminder that at the end of history, Jesus will come again in glory with the clouds and he will have victory.

And everyone will see him. And those who have rejected him and said that we are stupid for believing in Jesus. And those who have persecuted us will either be defeated like the enemies of Israel.

Or they will repent and mourn and join us in worshiping Jesus, the only one who deserves praise and glory. Are you looking forward to that time?

Are you groaning along with the persecuted and rejected Christians from all ages and all places? Are you crying out to God like the psalmists, How much longer, O God?

Are you praying to Jesus like John at the end of this book? Come, Lord Jesus, come. Well, in the meantime, God has given us these blessed reminders.

[26 : 19] So, if you are feeling heavy-hearted because of all the sufferings and pains in this world, especially all the pains and suffering caused by people's rejection and persecution of Jesus' followers, take heart that here in this book you will find comfort for your souls.

Here in this book, God has given us a gift. He opens the door of heaven to let us take a peek, to let us see the heavenly perspective that comforts us, empowers us, and reminds us to witness about Jesus through suffering and persecution.

And when we do face rejection and persecution, pray, pray that God may remind us of this heavenly perspective.

So, let's pray now. Father, thank you that you've given us this beautiful revelation of who you are and what you've done through Jesus, your Son.

Help us to live with this heavenly perspective that encourages us, comforts us, and challenges us to live to your glory. In the name of Christ, the King of kings, who loves us and has died for us, we pray.

[27 : 55] Amen.