

Persecution of Believers Ends at Christ's Second Coming

The persecution of Christians is common to today. It is occurring in almost every nation around the world including our own nation. When I say persecution, you might be thinking that I am referring to someone physically hurting or killing a Christian. While it is true that Christians are being hurt and killed for their faith, the word persecution in the New Testament can also refer to oppression and harassment of Christians. Just read the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:11, Jesus said that believers are blessed if they are persecuted. Matthew 5:11 says,

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Matthew 5:11 (NASB)

Then in verse 12 Jesus said our reward in heaven would be great. This means that

just as we learned in the last study that God will reward unbelievers with degrees of punishment in hell forever, He will give believers degrees of rewards in heaven.

The book of Acts tells us that many Christians in the early church were persecuted and falsely slandered! For example, Acts 17:1-2 tells us that the apostle Paul visited the city of Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. When he visited the city, he entered a Jewish synagogue on three Sabbaths and preached Christ to them each time from the Old Testa-

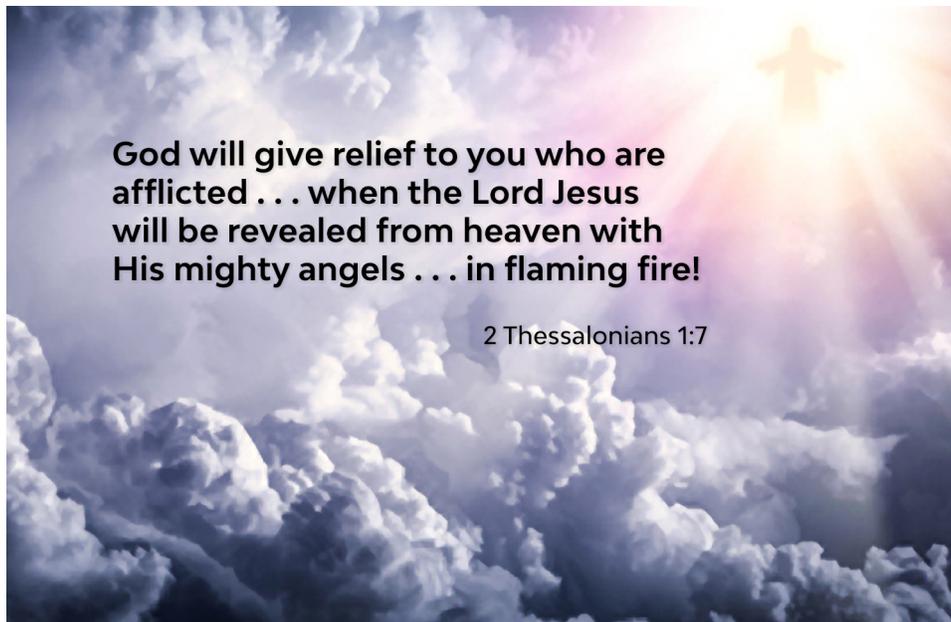
ment. As a result, some Jews repented of their sins, believed in Christ and became followers of Him. We are also told that many of the God-fearing Greek men and women believed in Christ. That is, a massive number of people believed in Jesus (Acts 17:4).

Now while we rejoice at this good news, it offended some of the non-believing Jews in the city of Thessalonica. So, these Jews organized a mob and caused a riot. Eventually, the mob attacked Jason, who was apparently a Jew (Acts 17:5-6). We do not know anything about him, except that he was attacked by the mob. Acts 17:6 says the mob dragged him and some

other believers out of their homes. The next verse says the mob was angry because Jason and others were preaching that Jesus was a king. The mob claimed this teaching was a threat to the Roman Empire. They accepted only one king. Today many

around the world hate Christians because we follow Christ and His teachings. The world used to praise the teachings of Christ for their moral principles, but today believers are persecuted for believing and following His teachings.

In our nation on August 2020, the Democratic National Committee passed a resolution that criticizes anyone who claims that the morals and values, as defined by one particular religion, are now a threat to the LGBT community, women,



and ethnic and religious/nonreligious minorities.¹ Now, my purpose in referring to the resolution is to illustrate the point that just as the early believers were viewed as a threat, believers today are also viewed as a threat. Nothing is new!

Acts 17:8-9 states the city leaders of Thessalonica were able to stop the riot by getting an agreement from Jason and some other believers. Now we do not know what that agreement included; but it is clear from Acts 17:10, that immediately the believers sent Paul and Silas away to another city.

BACKGROUND FROM 1 THESSALONIANS. Now one would think that peace would have existed in the city of Thessalonica after Paul and Silas left. But 1 Thessalonians 3:6-8 reveals that persecution continued even after Paul and Silas were gone. Since 1 Thessalonians was written about A.D. 51, this means Paul wrote the book shortly after he and Silas had left. We learn in verses 6 through 8 that Paul wanted to know if the believers were continuing in the faith while being persecuted. That is, were they persevering in the faith? He learned they were! That would seem to be good news.

Worried They had Missed the Rapture. But in A.D. 52, Paul wrote another epistle, 2 Thessalonians, because the believers were worried they had missed the rapture because they were still being persecuted. In fact, their persecution was so bad that they thought they were in the tribulation period. Apparently, they had sent a message to Paul about their great concern. So Paul encouraged them by teaching them that their perseverance in the faith was proof they were true believers. We find this message in 2 Thessalonians 1:4.

... therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. 2 Thessalonians 1:4 (NASB)

Worthy of the Kingdom and Rapture. Then in verse 5, Paul told them that their perseverance in the faith revealed they were worthy of the kingdom. This should have been a comfort to them, and it should be a comfort for all believers today, because only believers will be in the kingdom when it first

starts.

God Punishes Our Persecutors for Eternity. Beginning with verse 6, Paul told them that God would avenge them for their suffering. Their persecutors would suffer for eternity. We learned in the last study that only unbelievers will persecute believers because of Christ. Paul told them in verse 8 that the persecutors of believers do not know God and do not obey the Lord Jesus. So if someone persecutes you because of Christ, you can be comforted that there is nothing wrong with you. Your persecutors have a serious problem. They have rejected God and Christ.

RELIEF COMES AT THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST. This brings us to our study in verses 7 and 10 of 2 Thessalonians 1. Our study can be outlined in two parts. The first part is verse 7, which is titled “Relief Comes at the Second Coming of Christ.” The second part is verse 10, which is titled, “Joy Comes at the Second Coming of Christ.” I want to start by reading verse 6 so that we understand the context. Here are verses 6 and 7.

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire . . . 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 (NASB)

Meaning of Relief. Notice that in the first part of verse 7, God said that He will give believers relief from their persecutors. The Greek word that Paul used for “relief” is *anesis*. It has a wide range of meanings. Sometimes it is translated as “freedom,” “rest,” “peace,” and “relief.” Now in order to understand what Paul was teaching these believers and us, we need to understand the last part of this verse.

Meaning of Revealed from Heaven. In the last part of verse 7, Paul promised these believers that God would give them relief when Christ is revealed from heaven. The question we must ask is, “What does ‘revealed from heaven’ mean?” Does this refer to the rapture of believers from the earth or to the second coming of Christ, which will occur at the end of the tribulation?

Now, before I answer the question, I want to quickly describe God’s timeline of the future. We will discuss this in

1. Peter Hasson . DNC Resolution Celebrates Religiously Unaffiliated. The Daily Signal. August 30, 2020.

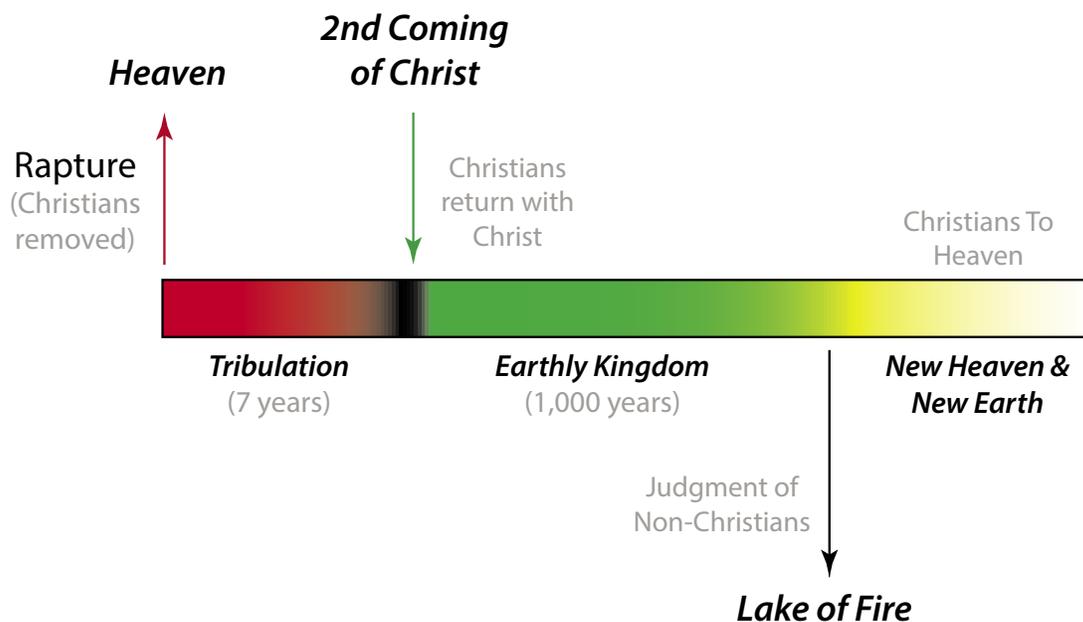
greater detail later. For now, let's just say that the rapture is the next big event in God's future timeline. The rapture occurs when Christ comes in the air and removes all true believers from the earth. A seven year tribulation will follow the rapture. At the end of the tribulation, the second coming of Christ will occur. Revelation 19:11-19 tells us that Christ will come in the air with all the believers of all the ages. He will descend to the earth and kill all the opposing armies of the world. Then Christ will gather all the believers who are still alive at the end of the tribulation. They will together with the

A review of the New Testament reveals that this Greek word is never used to refer to the rapture. That is the first reason why "revealed from heaven" refers to the second coming of Christ.

The second reason is found in Matthew 24:29-31, where Jesus said this,

But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the

Timeline of The Future



returning believers from heaven enter into the kingdom. At the end of the kingdom, all the believers will enter the new heaven and new earth. All the unbelievers will go to the lake of fire. Now I want to repeat our question. "What does 'revealed from heaven' mean?" Does it refer to the rapture or to the second coming?

The answer is that it refers to the second coming of Christ. There are two reasons why this is the correct answer. The first reason is that the Greek word for "revealed" is *apokalypsis*. It is the same word from which we get the English word apocalypse.

Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. Matthew 24:29-31 (NASB)

Before Jesus spoke these words, He had already described a series of events that would occur during the tribulation period

(verses 15-28). Then Jesus said the Son of Man will appear in the sky (v. 30). Notice in verse 31 He said, "His angels." Here in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, Paul calls these angels, "mighty angels" and says they will come in "flaming fire." Two more important passages are Matthew 13:39 and verses 49-50. These three verses teach that when Jesus comes at the end of the tribulation, angels come in judgment of unbelievers. But they do not come to judge believers. They come only to judge every unbeliever.

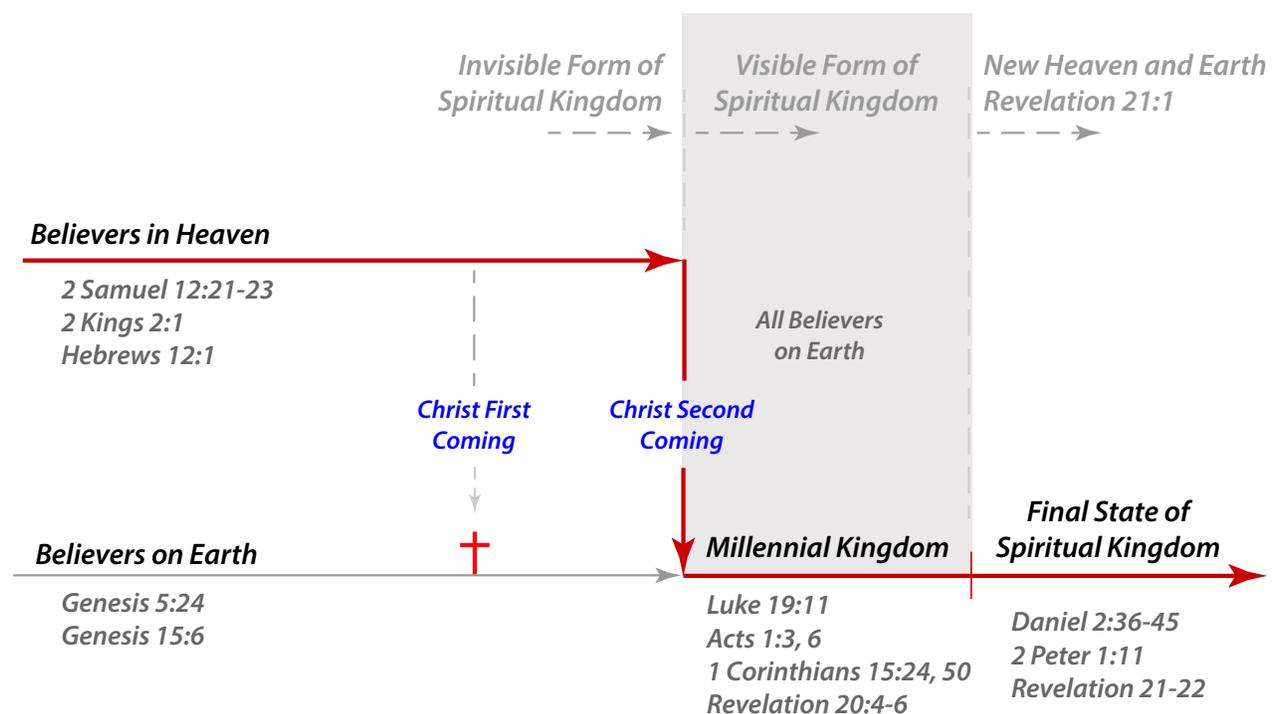
Therefore, we now understand that when Paul said that Christ will be revealed in heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, he was referring to the second coming of Christ. A few other passages about angels in flaming fire are Matthew 13:50 and Hebrews 1:7. So, Paul referred to the second coming of Christ.

Three Kinds of Rest for Believers. Now I have a question

for you. Why did Paul tell these believers that relief or peace would come at the second coming of Christ? I believe Paul said this for two reasons. The first reason is that these believers should experience peace when they realize that their persecutors will be punished at the second coming of Christ. That is, believers should be comforted that their persecutors will not escape judgment. God will avenge every believer! The second reason is that these believers and we will find rest at the second coming of Christ.

First Type of Rest — In Heaven. I want to talk about three types of rest that are mentioned in the Bible. The first type of rest occurs when believers die and go to heaven. Hebrews 4:1-11 refers to this type of rest symbolically. In the passage, God calls us to believe in Christ and stop or rest from trying to earn our salvation by works. When a person believes in Christ, there is a sense of rest. The rest or peace that we can then look

Father's Spiritual Kingdom



forward to is freedom from death and sin.

Second Type of Rest — The Millennial Kingdom. The second type of rest for believers will occur after the second coming of Christ. Scripture teaches that every believer who has lived since Adam and Eve will enter the millennial kingdom, which will occur after the second coming of Christ. Isaiah 65:17-25 is just one passage that describes the millennial kingdom. Listen to verses 20-25. It describes what the millennial kingdom will be like.

“No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days,
Or an old man who does not live out his days;
For the youth will die at the age of one hundred
And the one who does not reach the age of one hundred
Will be thought accursed.
They will build houses and inhabit them;
They will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They will not build and another inhabit,
They will not plant and another eat;
For as the lifetime of a tree, so will be the days of My people,
And My chosen ones will wear out the work of their hands.
They will not labor in vain,
Or bear children for calamity;
For they are the offspring of those blessed by the LORD,
And their descendants with them.
It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and
while they are still speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb
will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox; and
dust will be the serpent’s food. They will do no evil or harm in all
My holy mountain,” says the LORD. Isaiah 65:20-25 (NASB)

Notice that babies will not die early. Anyone who does not live to one hundred years of age will be considered accursed. People will live a very long time. People will live as long as trees do! Now that cannot be the new heaven and new earth described in Revelation 21-22 since those who live there will never die. They will live forever. We are also told in Isaiah 65 that people will not become tired of work and will be extremely productive. The wolf and lamb will graze together, and the lion’s diet will be vegetarian. The animal kingdom will eat vegetation. Snakes will eat dirt and will not do any harm

to anyone. Another similar passage is Isaiah 11:1-9. Zechariah 2:1-5 says God will protect His people. This means the millennial kingdom will be a time of rest and peace.

Third Type of Rest — The Eternal Heaven. The third and last type of rest occurs when believers leave the millennial kingdom and enter the eternal heaven, which is called the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21:4; 22:15. Revelation 21:4 says God will,

... wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. Revelation 21:4 (NASB)

That is where every believer will live forever and ever. So, what did Paul mean that these believers in Thessalonica would find relief or peace? The answer is that they along with Paul and any believer alive at the second coming will have peace in the millennial kingdom, when the Prince of Peace reigns over the earth.

BELIEVERS WILL ESCAPE THE TRIBULATION. So, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 taught the Thessalonians that they should be comforted by the fact their persecutors will be punished. If they were living in the tribulation, they would find peace in the millennial kingdom when the Prince of Peace reigns over the earth.

THREE SIDE COMMENTS. Now I want to make three side comments. My first comment is that I think it is important to state that God never promises believers that we will be free from persecution. He never promises that believers will not die from persecution. The early Christians suffered and died. Most of the apostles suffered martyrdom. Many Christians have and are suffering and dying for Christ, even today. But every believer should be comforted by the fact that their persecutors will not escape their just punishment of eternal suffering.

The second side comment is that Paul was not teaching these believers that they were in the tribulation. This will become obvious when we teach 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3. I do not want to take the time now to explain. But in a few studies, we will discover that Paul taught them that they were waiting for the rapture of the church, which will occur before the tribu-

lation. This means Paul was urging them to look to rest in the future, and not fix their eyes on their current problems.

The third side comment is that I do not believe believers will go through the tribulation for a number of reasons. The first important reason is that Revelation 3:10 was a promise to the Christians in the church in Philadelphia that they would escape the tribulation. It says this,

*Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour, which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.
Revelation 3:10 (NASB)*

Notice that Jesus promised these Christians that He would keep them from the hour of testing. That is a figure of speech that refers to the tribulation because the hour of testing is described as coming upon the “whole world.” That is, it is the tribulation period which will encompass the entire globe. What is the message? Jesus will keep believers out of the tribulation. I will explain more in a future study why Christians will not go into the tribulation.

JOY COMES AT THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST. Now we will jump to 2 Thessalonians 1:10. In this next passage we learn that believers will have joy at the Second Coming of Christ. It says,

... when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed — for our testimony to you was believed. 2 Thessalonians 1:10 (NASB)

I would just like to add that the Greek word for marveled also means “astonished.” That is, believers or saints of all the ages will be astonished at what they will see. This is the beginning of eternal relief or eternal peace. What will believers of all the ages experience? They will see the Prince of Peace, the Wonderful Counselor, our Mighty God (Isaiah 9:6-7). They will see Jesus, the Sovereign, reign as King of kings, and Lord of Lords over all the earth (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16). Joel 3:17 says He will reign in Zion, or Jerusalem, on God’s holy mountain. Matthew 25:31 tells us that Jesus will reign on His glorious throne. The earth will be lush with vegetation and

productive. The animal kingdom will be at peace. Sin will be suppressed, as Jesus rules with an iron fist. 2 Timothy 2:12 and Revelation 20:6 teach that the saints will reign with Christ.

But the best news of all is that our just and holy God will be there. That is why Zechariah 14:20 says the bells on the horses will have the inscription of “Holy to the Lord” inscribed on them. Zechariah 8:20-23 says that all the people of the kingdom will seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and ask for the favor of the LORD. That is why the believers or saints in the millennial kingdom will glorify Jesus and be astonished. It will be a glorious time beyond description. We have a great future. That is why Paul was so positive in these closing verses.