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1 THE TITLE of SECTION II

THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH BY THE WORLD THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

***“IN THIS WORLD YOU WILL HAVE TROUBLE (TRIBULATION).
BUT TAKE HEART! I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD” (John 16:33).***

Again and again throughout the whole New Testament period the Church is persecuted by the world and subjected to trials and temptations.

2 THE DIVISION of SECTION II

The visions in the book of Revelation depict what happens between Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming in seven parallel sections. Each of the seven sections *begins* with Christ's first coming, is characterised by *a long main period*, is followed by *a short period* of violent persecution and *ends* with the final judgement day (Christ's second coming).

Section 2 of the book of Revelation consists of chapters 4 to 7 and covers the whole New Testament period between Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming.

a. The beginning of the New Testament period (4:1; 5:1-14; 7:1-8)

The New Testament period *begins* with a description of God's reign on his throne in heaven over everyone and everything (4:9-11) and from eternity to eternity (5:13-14).

God reigns through the Mediator, Jesus Christ. After the death and resurrection of Christ, his enthronement in heaven is represented by God giving Christ the scroll with seven seals. Christ receives from God the authority to reveal and to execute the apocalyptic events (5:1-14). Christ receives the same honour and glory as God the Father (5:12, cf. 4:11; John 5:23; 1 John 2:23).

After his resurrection from the dead Christ has been given all power in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). He has been given the power to close and open all doors (3:7-8). He gives John an open door to see reality from the heavenly point of view (4:1).

But before God sounds his trumpet judgements in the world (chapter 8 and 9), he seals all true Christians with the seal of the living God (7:1-8).

b. The long main period (6:1-11a)

The long main period consists of breaking the first five seals of the scroll (6:1-11). The scroll represents God's decrees with regard to his plan of salvation and judgement in the history of the world. Every time Christ breaks one of the seals, he reveals and executes an apocalyptic event, that is, a very important and grand event in the history of the world.

The first apocalyptic event represents Christ triumphantly proclaiming his gospel to all the nations (Matthew 24:14)(6:1-2).

The second apocalyptic event represents the religious persecution and oppression which the proclamation of Christ evokes. Christians are religiously slaughtered (6:3-4).

The third apocalyptic event represents the economic persecution and oppression which the proclamation of Christ evokes. Christians are economically oppressed (6:5-6).

The fourth apocalyptic event represents all the suffering of Christians and non-Christians throughout the whole New Testament period as a consequence of man's fall into sin. All people suffer the calamities of wars, hunger, sicknesses or plagues and accidents (6:7-8).

The fifth apocalyptic event represents Christians who are killed because of their faith in Christ. They represent the Triumphant Church in heaven waiting for God's time to end this suffering on earth. Christians who lose their lives for the sake of Christ immediately enter God's presence. They are comforted, because the injustice against them will certainly be judged.

'The great tribulation' in Revelation 7:14 refers to the trials (persecutions and oppressions), temptations (seductions) and troubles that overcome Christians throughout the whole New Testament period.

c. The short period (6:11b)

The short period of violent persecution consists of the peak of the fifth apocalyptic event during 'the great tribulation' at the end of the New Testament period (Matthew 24:21-29a). Then the number of fellow servants (workers, ministers) and brothers (believers) who were to be killed is completed.

d. The end of the New Testament period (6:12-17; 8:1)

The end of the New Testament period consists of breaking the sixth and seventh seal. The interval between the sixth and seventh seal (7:1-17) is not chronological, but describes the present New Testament period from the viewpoint of encouragement: the Militant Church is continually protected and the Triumphant Church will be glorious.

The sixth apocalyptic event represents (Christ's second coming and) the final judgement day. On that day there will be a great earthquake, the islands and mountains on earth will disappear and the sun, moon and stars in the universe will disintegrate (6:12-17).

The seventh apocalyptic event (silence in heaven) represents the reasons why Christ's second coming is delayed so long (8:1 ff).

e. The eternal state (7:9-17)

The eternal state is pictured as the Triumphant Church in heaven (the great multitude that no one could count that has come out of 'the great tribulation' throughout the whole New Testament period). They are pictured immediately after the final judgement day and are proclaiming the victory of salvation. They are the same as the 144 000 that had been sealed at the beginning of the New Testament period (7:4). Their distress and sorrow has ended for ever and they serve God day and night in his presence.

Conclusion

During the whole New Testament period Christ rules as Mediator between God and man. His kingship and authority is depicted as a revealing of the apocalyptic events and executing them. The apocalyptic events consist of salvation and judgement in the history of this world.

The second section of the book of Revelation consists of Revelation chapters 4 to 7 and covers the whole New Testament period from Christ's first coming to Christ's second coming. It gives insight into the eternal state beyond Christ's second coming.

3 THE STRUCTURE of SECTION II

a. The throne reigns amidst all events in history

Chapter 4. God's throne in eternity. He rules from eternity to eternity.

Chapter 5. God's throne in time. God the Father entrusts the rule of the universe to God the Son, the Mediator of God's eternal plan, symbolically written on a scroll in heaven.

Chapter 6. The breaking of the first six seals of the scroll. These reveal the main principles within God's history of salvation and judgement during the whole New Testament period.

Chapter 7. The Militant Church and the Triumphant Church. The Militant Church on earth before Christ's second coming is sealed in order to encourage Christians that they are protected. And the Triumphant Church in heaven after Christ's second coming is shown in order to encourage Christians that they have a glorious destination.

b. The place of chapter 5 within section 2

God reigns (chapter 4) through the Mediator, Jesus Christ (chapter 5). After the death and resurrection of Christ, his enthronement in heaven is represented by God giving Christ the scroll with seven seals. This symbolises that Christ received from God the authority to reveal and to execute the apocalyptic events (5:1-14). The first six apocalyptic events are revealed and begin to be executed from Christ's first coming. These apocalyptic events describe Christ conquering and its consequences: the oppression and persecution of the Church by the world.

That is why it is such a great encouragement for Christians that God through Christ reigns! Nothing in creation or history happens without his decree or his consent! Chapter 7 describes the sealing of the Church by God. That is why it is such a great encouragement for Christians that God protects them throughout the events in history! No oppression or persecution in history is without God's decree or permission! He makes all things, even the difficult and evil things, work together for the good of his people (Proverbs 16:4; Romans 8:28)!

4 THE MESSAGE of SECTION II¹

a. Chapter 4. The eternal God is also the God of creation and of history

The vision in chapter 4 is not an appearance of God, but *a revelation* of the eternal God! God surrounded by all his heavenly and earthly creatures is the absolute Arranger or Disposer of all things. He rules the universe in all its parts. He carries out his eternal counsel unchanged and right to the end. He realises its contents and its extent completely, with unlimited sovereignty, inscrutable wisdom, in righteousness, holiness, goodness, truth and glory. That is why only the God of the Bible should be worshipped and praised (Isaiah 42:8; Romans 11:36)!

¹ cf. Bavinck, chapter 3

Chapter 4 relates to God who is worthy to be praised by all creation, his creatures and his people. All things must ultimately glorify God, because he created all things and his will has been carried out, is being carried out and shall be carried out in the universe (4:11; cf. Romans 11:36). No human being, no government, no blind fate and no evil spirit rule the universe! It is the God of the Bible on his throne that rules! God's sovereign will is the ground of all things that has been created and the ground of everything that happens in the history of the world: in the past, the present and the future (4:11). Before the scroll of God's eternal counsel is opened, John sees in a vision the eternal God sitting on his throne in glorious heavenly majesty as the Creator and the highest sovereign King, that is, as the God of Creation and the God of history.

b. Chapter 5. The eternal plan of God is being realised in time

Revelation chapters 4 and 5 do not merely describe a picture of heaven. They *describe eternity (God) and time (the entire created universe) from the aspect of heaven!* Chapter 5 reveals that God gave the scroll in heaven to Jesus Christ. There is a BOOK in heaven, a scroll. It is not simply mentioned and its contents are not simply spoken of. No, this book in heaven is given only to Jesus Christ to reveal and to execute!

This book or scroll symbolically contains God's decrees (decisions, plan) with regard to what he does through the Mediator, Jesus Christ, on earth and in the whole universe. All things in the universe: creation, redemption, judgement and recreation, are governed from heaven by the God of the Bible through Jesus Christ! The history of the world is in fact the realisation of God's deliberate and permissive will. That is also why the symbolic description of the throne (chapter 4 and 5) precedes the symbolic description of the apocalyptic events in history: the persecutions and trials, the suffering and waiting, which the Church must experience here on earth (chapter 6).

c. Chapter 6. God's decrees are revealed and executed by Christ on earth

God's throne in heaven (chapter 4 and 5) oversees God's footstool on earth (chapter 6). God's throne in heaven rules and controls the universe, including what happens on earth. God's footstool on earth is God's work in the Church (6:1-2) amidst the persecutions and trials of the world (6:3-8).

Whenever in history the Church is faithful to its calling and bears testimony concerning the truth, tribulation (persecutions and trials) is bound to follow. *The Church is in the world and therefore suffers along with the world.* Christians do not escape the horrors of war, famine and plague. Also the Church is still imperfect and in constant need of purification and sanctification (cf. the seven letters in Revelation chapter 2 and 3).

The Church needs these tribulations. It needs both the direct antagonism of the world and the participation in the common woes that pertain to this earthly life as a result of sin. Christ employs the persecutions and trials as his instrument for the spiritual advancement of the Church (Romans 5:3-5; James 2:1-4).

d. Chapter 7. God's people are protected at the beginning and gloriously triumphant at the end

In chapter 7 Christ reveals the sealing of his people at the beginning of the New Testament period and the glory of his people at the end of the New Testament period. He seals Christians, the Militant Church (7:1-8), at his first coming, before he executes the apocalyptic events (chapter 6) and before his angels blow the warning trumpets (chapters 8 and 9). He seals them so that they will never be damned (never go lost) in spite of the persecutions and trials they face on earth. He also reveals the glory of Christians, the Triumphant Church (7:9-17), after his second coming, so that they may constantly keep their final destiny in mind.

e. Chapter 4 to 7. God's reign has an eternal and a historical aspect

Section 2 of the book of Revelation contains the great vision of the heavenly throne of God *in eternity* (Revelation 4:1-6a) as the contrast of the reality of the Church on earth (Revelation chapters 2 and 3). Then follows the first sign of the coming things *in God's history of salvation in time* (Revelation 4:6b-11).

It shows the beginning of the coming things or 'the last days' by the vision of Christ's first coming (Revelation 5:1-12) and its results (Revelation chapters 6 and 7). All this is salvation history. Finally this section shows the end of these coming things or 'the last days' by the vision of God's throne in eternity (Revelation 5:13-14), that is, after Christ's second coming (Revelation chapters 21 and 22). Then everything in the universe will praise the kingship or kingdom of God the Father and God the Son forever and ever.

Thus, the coming things or ‘the last days’ stretch from Christ’s first coming to his second coming.²

In chapter 4 to 7 Christ reveals the heavenly throne of God *in eternity* (God in the centre)(4:1-6a), the work of Christ *in time* (Christ in the centre)(5:1-10; 6:1-17; 7:1-8) and again the effect that Christ’s work of salvation and judgement has around the throne of God *in eternity* (God in the centre)(5:11-14; 7:9-17).

Jesus Christ is God that left the eternal reality, entered creation and time, died and was resurrected in human history, and then re-entered the eternal reality.

Thus, Revelation chapters 4 and 5 as a whole reveal *the eternal perspective*: God on his throne rules the whole universe from eternity to eternity and carries out his plan through the Lamb, Jesus Christ. And Revelation chapters 6 and 7 as a whole reveal *the historical perspective*: The victorious course of Christ and his gospel and the protection of his Church within world history.

In Revelation 4:8,11 God is called ‘Lord’³ as is Jesus Christ in the New Testament and in Revelation 17:14 and 19:16. ‘The Lordship’⁴ of Christ and ‘the kingship or kingdom’⁵ of Christ are equivalent, because the enthronement of Christ in Philippians 2:9-11 has exactly the same results as the handing over of the kingdom to God the Father in 1 Corinthians 15:24. While Philippians 2:9-11 denotes *the beginning* of Christ’s kingship or kingdom on earth, 1 Corinthians 15:24,28 denotes *the end* of this kingship or kingdom of Christ on earth. Thus ‘the kingship or kingdom of Christ’ *within human history* stretches between Christ’s first coming and Christ’s second coming. Jesus Christ begins his reign as Mediator at his first coming and completes his reign as Mediator at his second coming.

‘The kingship or kingdom of God’ beyond this present human history, thus *in eternity*, begins at Christ’s second coming. In 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 Jesus Christ as God the Son subjects himself to God the Father and hands the kingship or kingdom to God the Father. When he subjects himself to God the Father it does not mean that he gives up his divine nature. And when he hands the kingship or kingdom to God the Father it does not mean that he no longer reigns. It means that he has completed his task as Mediator and hands that responsibility back to the One who sent him into creation and into human history to redeem the lost and to subdue everyone. Then Jesus Christ is no longer the Mediator of God’s kingship or kingdom within human history, but reigns for all eternity together with God the Father on his throne (5:13; 7:10; cf. 22:1,3). This reign of God the Father and God the Son remains eternal (2 Samuel 7:13; Isaiah 9:7; 2 Peter 1:11)!

² ‘The last days’ in the Bible refer to the following:

- the first coming of Christ (Hebrews 1:2; 9:26; 1 Peter 2:17)
- the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17)
- the whole New Testament period (2 Timothy 3:1; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3; 1 John 2:18)
- the resurrection of Christians at the second coming of Christ (John 6:39,44; 11:24; 12:48).

‘The end of the age’ in the Bible refers to the following:

- the whole New Testament period (1 Corinthians 10:11; Ephesians 1:10)
- the harvest at the second coming of Christ (Matthew 13:39; 24:3)

³ κυριος

⁴ κυριότης

⁵ βασιλεια