

Last Sunday was the International day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. We did pray for the persecuted church in both services, but I figured that we would give a little more attention to praying for the persecuted church today since last week was a celebration of our first Sunday in our new church building. And that works well with the special offering for Voice of the Martyrs. We have already focused the majority of our congregational prayer on the persecuted church and this sermon this morning will be about the hope that enables believers who are being persecuted to persevere.

As we have seen many times through this series of sermons, the book of Revelation was written to encourage believers in times of persecution and spiritual warfare. In the opening chapter of the book, John refers to himself as “your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.” We have seen before that there is a continuum in persecution from scorn and mockery all the way to torture and death. There has never been a time when all Christians were persecuted in the most severe ways but all Christians everywhere are hated by the world and constantly under Satanic attack. We are all engaged in spiritual warfare in one way or another. We are all called to endure in the face of tremendous challenges to give up and go along with the world.

It is an important biblical principle that those who are experiencing less severe persecution, support our brothers and sisters who are experiencing more severe persecution. The book of Hebrews was written to Christians who were experiencing persecution and it has some very helpful things to say on this matter. Hebrews 13:3 says, “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.” And in Hebrews 10:32 we read, “But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you know that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.”

These verses reflect the reality that not all believers experience persecution in the same way and to the same degree, and it teaches that those who are on the lighter end of the spectrum are to remember and to support those who are experiencing greater hardship and suffering because of the hatred of the world. We are to remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them. We are to support those who are experiencing great hardship. We are reminded that we are all in the same body. And Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 12:25, “that the members [of the body should] have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together....”

Now at the moment, the most severe persecution is going on in far away places. That is why we need to work together with other Christians to provide some help and support to our fellow believers who are being persecuted in ways that we are not at the present time. And so we have the opportunity to support Voice of the Martyrs which has the infrastructure to use the resources we give them for the support of our brothers

and sisters who are in great need. It is significant for us that one of the passages in Hebrews that I just mentioned calls on us to “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them....” That is important. We are to remember. We are to think about them. One way that we can do that is read some of the literature and updates that are available on the VOM website and many other sources. Those updates are there to help us to pray for those who are suffering for their faith. And certainly the most common request from the believers who are facing persecution is for prayer.

Now one of the points about persecution in the Bible is that the reason that believers are able to stand fast in it is the hope that the gospel holds out for believers beyond this life. Hebrews 10:34 said to the Hebrew Christians, “you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” Jesus told his disciples to rejoice and be glad when they were persecuted “for your reward is great in heaven.” And this is a big part of the message of the book of Revelation as well. The great encouragement for those who are being persecuted is the great future that God has in store for his people. And it is that same great future that is an encouragement for us to share in the persecution of our brothers and sisters by means of our praying and caring and giving. Our fellow believers who are enduring persecution are helped to make the sacrifices they have to make because of the hope for a glorious future beyond this life for those who remain faithful. But we are helped to make the sacrifices God is calling us to make by the same hope. And I want us to look at the first verse of Revelation 21 in that light.

First John sees a new heaven and a new earth. Revelation 21:1, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” This refers to the final state. This is where believers will live after the end of this world as we know it, the return of Christ and the final judgment. There is going to be a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth are going to pass away. And there is going to be a new heaven and a new earth.

That does not mean brand new in the sense of throwing away the old and replacing it with something completely new. You might get that impression from some verses in the Bible, particularly 2 Peter 3:10 which says that when the day of the Lord comes, “the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” This verse, however, is better understood as referring to a cleansing rather than the complete annihilation of the created order. If we consider other relevant passages it becomes clear that what is going to happen is that God is going to renew the created order rather than destroy it and beginning again with a brand new creation.

Romans 8:21 makes this clear. Paul says there that, “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” This is the language of renewal rather than the language of discarding the old and beginning again with something completely new. Another important verse is Matthew 19:28 where Jesus speaks of “the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne.” The Greek word that the term “new world” translates means literally “the regeneration.”

The term “regeneration” for the final state conveys the idea of renewal rather than the idea of discarding the old and starting again from scratch.

And this idea fits with the way that God saves his people. We are part of the creation and God does not destroy us and start over again. He renews us. That renewal begins here in this age, but it is completed with the resurrection of our bodies. And in our resurrected state we will be the same people, only redeemed, and renewed and glorified. The way that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, speaks about what we will be like after the resurrection gives us wonderful insight into how the rest of the creation will be the same creation only renewed and even more wonderful than this present creation.

In 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 compares the body that is buried with the body that is raised from the dead. This is what he says: <sup>42</sup>So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. <sup>43</sup>It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. <sup>44</sup>It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body."

The resurrection of our bodies is a physical resurrection. Our bodies will be the same bodies only renewed and glorified. Paul uses the words, imperishable, glory, power and spiritual to refer to our resurrected bodies. He uses the word “spiritual”, but “spiritual” here does not mean immaterial. The ESV Study Bible explains, “By spiritual body Paul does not mean an immaterial body but a body animated and empowered by the Holy Spirit.” Our resurrected bodies will be imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual in the sense of filled with the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s teaching about the difference between our bodies when we die and our bodies when they are raised helps us to see the relationship between the heavens and earth as we experience them now and the new heavens and new earth. Just as God did not throw us away and start from scratch, so he does not throw away his original creation and start from scratch. Just as he saves us from sin, renews us and will glorify us, so he saves the rest of his creation from the results of sin and renews and glorifies it. There is both continuity and discontinuity. It’s the same creation. But it will be cleansed from all the results of sin and renewed and made even more glorious than the original creation was. Hear again how Paul describes it in Romans 8:21, “The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

This is what John is describing in Revelation 21. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away....” This is a huge part of the biblical hope. God did not abandon his original idea after the entrance of sin into the world. He implemented a plan of salvation and the end goal of that salvation is not something entirely new.

The best way to think about what the new heavens and the new earth will be like is to look back to God’s original creation as a starting point. God created us as physical beings to live in a physical world. He created us

in his image to worship and serve him, but the context for that worship and service was a beautiful physical world that reflected his glory. And a huge part of worshipping and serving him consisted of working and enjoying the rich experience of life in the beautiful world in perfect fellowship with God and with people.

When John uses the term “new heavens and new earth” we are to understand that the new creation will be something like the old creation. There will be no more sin. And it will be even more glorious than the original creation. But it will not be something completely different either. There will be differences, but the language of new heavens and new earth teaches us that God’s plan of salvation is the fulfillment of his original intention when he created the heavens and the earth at the beginning. It will be a rich physical existence on this earth where we will love God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. It will be beautiful. It will be interesting. We will experience the fullness of our humanity as we glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Life on earth can be wonderful. It is marred because of sin and so there is suffering. But there is also the possibility of much joy and fulfillment. And that is true in a far greater way when we are redeemed and God is at the center of our lives in the here and now. We experience joy and fulfillment in our relationship with God. We experience joy and fulfillment in our families and relationships with other people. We experience many pleasurable things that are even more profoundly pleasurable when we delight in God’s love to us in them. There is so much that is interesting and fulfilling in work, in play, and in rest. All that is good about that picture is God’s intention for us as humans made in his image. And it is going to be something like that in the new heavens and the new earth – only without sin and even better than the best of our experience in this life.

John fills out this picture by adding the little clause, “and the sea was no more.” That may seem like a very strange thing to say. But the book of Revelation is full of strange symbols and this reference to the sea is also symbolic. Thankfully it is not to be taken literally. John is not making the point that there will be no oceans in the new creation. Since there are oceans in this creation, it would not be surprising if there were oceans in the new creation as well, but that is not a question that the Bible answers. When John says here that “the sea was no more” he is referring to the sea as a symbol of chaos and evil. The ancient Israelites were not a seafaring people and the sea for them was scary and threatening and so the sea became a symbol of chaos and evil. We see an example of this in Isaiah 57:20 which says, “But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt.”

The book of Revelation uses this symbolism frequently. In 13:1 the beast rises out of the sea. In 17:1 the great prostitute is seated on many waters. In 18:11-19 the merchants of the earth who are associated with greed and materialism and self-indulgence conduct their trade on the sea. In 20:13 the sea is the place of the dead. The sea in the book of Revelation is associated with evil, and death and the tribulation of God’s people. And so when John says that “the sea was no more” in the new heavens and the new earth he means that there will be no more evil and the turmoil and unrest that is the result of evil.

This is a comforting note for us to hear at the current time. We are certainly seeing what the symbol of the sea represents in the chaos and the danger that it represents in our time. We certainly see the hatred of the world against the people of God in our time. There is more persecution today than there has ever been. And we see the increasing hostility against the church in the west as militant proponents of the LGBT agenda are bent on silencing the witness of the church relating to God's will for sexuality and gender.

"The wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt." Wickedness and peace do not dwell together. Wickedness is expressed as greed and selfishness and hatred and brokenness. Just compare the works of the flesh in Galatians 5 with the fruit of the Spirit. The works of the flesh are vices like impurity, enmity, strife, and rivalries. The fruit of the Spirit are the virtues of love, joy, and peace. So where wickedness abounds there is unrest and turmoil. And where holiness and righteousness abounds there is peace and harmony and wellbeing.

That is the point of the sea being no more in the new creation. It will be a world of peace in the deepest sense – love and harmony between God and man and between people and between people and the creation. Isaiah spoke of Jesus as the Prince of Peace. In Isaiah 9:7 we read, "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end...." And in Isaiah 11:6, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child will lead them." And verse 9 "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." And Micah 4:3-4, "[T]hey shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

These prophecies give us a sense of the intent of the promise that there will be no more sea in the new heavens and the new earth. The sea as a symbol of the unrest and conflict and chaos that is the result of sin and the lack of the sea as a symbol of the peace that is the result of Jesus' work of salvation. Colossians 1 speaks of this peace as a result of Jesus' work of salvation when Paul writes in verse 20 that God through Jesus would "reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." The idea in Revelation 21 that there will be no sea in the new creation is the same as the idea here in Colossians 1 that Jesus came to "reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." When everything is reconciled, then you have peace. When everything is reconciled you have no more hatred and fighting and hurting.

So that is the picture the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of Revelation 21 gives us. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." The people of God are going to live in a beautiful physical creation from which sin and all its effects have been removed - only it will be much more glorious than the original creation. God's intension for human beings in his original creation will be

realized as the saved love and worship and serve God and as they live together with others in perfect peace and harmony. There is a great deal that we do not know, of course. The Bible does not give us many details. The closest thing we have is the original creation and God's original intention and then a few more hints sprinkled through the rest of the Bible. But we know it will be good. It will be very good. There will be shalom – that comprehensive wellbeing that results when all relationship is in harmony.

This verse is in the book of Revelation to give hope to Christians in persecution and in spiritual warfare. We are remembering our persecuted brothers and sisters today. They are going through hard times. Some of them experience terrible losses – unspeakable suffering. The book of Revelation makes it clear that there will be a lot of persecution in the history of the church. Revelation 13, which describes the world organized against God using the symbol of the beast, says in verse 7 “And it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.” Persecution has always been a reality for the people of God. It is a terrible reality today. Great numbers of believers are suffering because of their faith, some of them in horrific ways. The Bible teaches that terrible reality is to be expected. There is nothing surprising about it in the light of biblical teaching.

The biblical perspective is that the suffering can be endured faithfully because it is temporary and because what is to come is so glorious. There are more truths that give comfort and strength, but this is a big one. Revelation 2:10 says, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

The wonderful future that God has in store for his people helps to strengthen them to endure persecution. As Paul writes in Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

As we think of our persecuted brothers and sisters, one of the things that we can pray for is that this hope will be very real to them – that they will be strengthened to endure because of the coming new heaven and new earth along other aspects of the biblical hope.

But we need to live in the light of this hope as well. Both those who face greater persecution and those who face little persecution need to live in the light of the biblical hope. One of the implications of that is that this life is short. We are just passing through. This world is not our home. It must all be left behind. Whether it is relatively hard or relatively easy, it is a temporary state of affairs. For our persecuted brothers and sisters, it means that their suffering will soon be over. For we who experience much more comfort and pleasantness, it means that we must not be too attached to our worldly possessions and comforts but be looking forward to the new heavens and the new earth.

And that can motivate us to give – to remember – to pray for our persecuted fellow believers. WE belong to the same body. We are heading to the same place. And we are called to be there for them – to give material

help as we are able and to think about their stories and to pray for them. Let us meditate on the new heavens and the new earth and let us view this present life in that light and so let us die to self as they are called to die to self so that we can be partners with them in their suffering.

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The new heaven and the new earth will one day be a reality because of the death of Christ. This present creation is under a curse because of sin. Through the fall into sin the world has been marred in many ways principally through the sinfulness of the human race. The only hope was saving us from our sins. And that is what Jesus did through his perfect life, sacrificial death, and the conquering of death in the resurrection. The new heavens and the new earth will be renewed and glorious because Jesus has overcome sin by paying its penalty and by fulfilling the law. As we saw from Colossians 1:20, Jesus came to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. That is why we have the hope of the new creation.

The Lord's Supper symbolizes our participation in the complete salvation that Jesus has accomplished. It is a cosmic salvation, but we participate in it through faith in Jesus and that is symbolized by our receiving the tokens which represent the body and blood of Jesus. The glorious future of the new heaven and new earth is for those who believe in Jesus and the Lord's Supper is about reassuring us that Jesus truly gives us what the symbols signify when we receive him in faith.

Our hope is only real, at least at a subjective level, if we are assured that we will take part in the fulfillment. And the Lord's Supper is intended to strengthen our faith in Jesus and our assurance that we participate in the salvation that is in him.

It is for those who confess that they are sinners deserving the wrath of God, who are trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins and renewal of their lives and who are committed to the life of obedience that results from the renewal that Jesus works in us through the Holy Spirit. As part of that we require membership in a faithful protestant church because obedience in the NT involves church membership and participation in the life of the church.