

Are We Living in the Fifth Seal of Revelation?

The Middle East is on fire! War rages between Israel and Hamas, ISIS runs rampant over parts of Iraq, and Islamic extremist terrorist groups like al-Qaeda threaten the security of the region. All of this is a fulfillment of Bible prophecy of the last days. Jesus said it would happen: "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars ... nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom" (Matt. 24:6-7).

But it's going to get worse before it gets better. He added, "All these are the beginning of birth pains" (Matt. 24:8). At the end of the age, Jesus Christ will return, and the world will enjoy the peace and prosperity of his kingdom.

These wars and conflicts are spiritual in nature. Radical Islam seeks to rule by shariah law and drive out or destroy anyone of any other faith, especially Christians and Jews. In the last days, Jesus said, "You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated of all nations because of me" (Matt. 24:9).

A good friend asked me what I thought about the suffering of Christians in the Middle East and other nations such as North Korea, and I said, "I think we are living under the fifth seal of the Revelation." John described it this way: "When he (Jesus) opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained" (Rev 6:9).

We are engaged in a great spiritual war. The Revelator said, "There was war in heaven" (Rev 12:7). This spiritual war is seen in the persecution of God's people. Satan is described in the Revelation as a great Red Dragon who is enraged at Israel and Christians. He "went off to make war against ... those who

obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17).

Christians are now being driven out of Iraq at the threat of their lives. According to Mirror Online's Labour Politics panelist, Tom Watson, militant fighters known as ISIS have declared a new Islamic state in northern Iraq. Ten years ago "Mosul was home to one of the world's ancient Christian communities; an estimated 60,000 lived in this northern Iraqi city. For nearly 2,000 years, Christians and Muslims rubbed along together. But now ISIS has forced Christians to convert to Islam or be driven out—or worse. Doors to the homes of Christians have been daubed in red by ISIS militants to speed up the process of mass religious 'cleansing.' More than two dozen powerless churches now lie abandoned as worshippers run for their lives."

I recently met a pastor from Pakistan who had to flee his country because of persecution. He and his family suffered greatly with his life being threatened. When he fled the country, all his possessions were seized by the government. He and his family were left destitute.

A good friend of mine, a pastor in Iran, is suffering seven years of imprisonment for preaching the gospel of Christ. He refused to recant his faith and was imprisoned. Only the letters of appeal to the court and an excellent attorney kept him from life in prison or possible execution for the charge of converting people to Christ.

Look at this alarming news headline: "Pakistan mob kills woman, girls, over 'blasphemous' Facebook post.'" Syed Raza Hassan reported the story of a Pakistani mob who "killed [a] woman member of a religious sect and two of her granddaughters after a sect member was accused of posting blasphemous material on Facebook, police said Monday, the latest instance of growing violence against minorities."

"The dead, including a 7-year-old girl and her baby sister, were Ahmadis, who consider themselves Muslim but believe in a prophet after Mohammed. A 1984 Pakistani law declared them non-Muslims, and many Pakistanis consider them heretics." A crowd of 150 came to the police station and registered a blasphemy case against them. While the police were negotiating with them the mob started burning the houses of Ahmadis. "Accusations of blasphemy are rocketing in Pakistan, from one in 2011 to at least 68 last year, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. About 100 people have been accused of blasphemy this year."

I talked to a pastor in India who told me about a high government official who started a personal campaign to drive all the Christians out of India. He visited several cities and began to build a consensus among leaders for his cause. Then his own daughter confessed to him that she had become a Christian and told him, "If you drive all the Christians out of India, you will drive me out of our home." He didn't want to lose his daughter so he dropped his cause!

What should we do? Stand firm in our faith and let the light of Jesus shine brightly to dispel the darkness of evil in the world. As the devil prowls around the world today looking for someone to devour, let us resist him standing firm in the faith (see 1 Peter 5:8-9).

In the words of singer Tom Petty: "Well I know what's right, I got just one life/ In a world that keeps on pushin' me around/ But I'll stand my ground, and I won't back down/ You can stand me up at the gates of hell/ But I won't back down!"

David Cooper is lead pastor of Mount Paran Church in Atlanta. He is also the author of several books, including his latest, *Unfinished Business*.