

A Throne in Heaven

We are two weeks into our study of the book of Revelation, the book of revealing what is mostly unseen to us. We saw last week in the letters to the seven churches that people were “seeing” their world and their spiritual experience, in a different way than Jesus was seeing it. For example, the Christians in Pergamum saw themselves as living right below a majestic hill featuring an acropolis filled with beautiful temples and they felt with all their neighbours the pride in being from that city. Jesus said, “I know where you live, where Satan has his throne.” So much for the acropolis! The church in Sardis was content to live out of their reputation, and Jesus said, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!”

Forty times in Revelation, John writes, “I saw” and 32 times he writes, “I heard”. Nineteen times he issues a command to his readers: “Look!” Any kind of revelation has two parts: one is the unveiling, the revealing, but the second part is the seeing, the careful observation, being in the right place with the right heart in order to truly see what is going on.

There are five main sections in the book, with one being the first three chapters which we’ve studied. The remaining four sections are each introduced by the phrase that includes the word “open” or “opened”:

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven
(Rev. 4:1)

Then God’s temple in heaven was opened (11:19)

After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. (15:5)

I saw heaven standing open (19:11)

The first of these is where we’ll spend our time today and over the next two weeks as well. What does John see and what does he want his readers to learn from what he sees? As I read this, try to imagine that you can see this too

There before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were 24 other thrones, and seated on them were 24 elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also, before the throne, there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stopped saying:

*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty
Who was, and is, and is to come.*

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the 24 elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

*You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power
For You created all things and by Your will
they were created and have their being. (Rev. 4:2-11)*

Where did this take place? Or, to be clear about my point, where is heaven? John was sitting on a rock pile in a political prison on the island of Patmos when he saw a door opened in heaven. He wasn't transported millions of light years away to some far-flung galaxy -- he was here. And what he saw was here, although not something that is normally visible to humans living on this earth. This tells us that heaven is near, but is another dimension that is not readily available to us. There is a veil, a wall of sorts, that separates us from heaven and only when the veil is removed, or a door opened, can we see what John saw.

The first thing John sees is a throne, and someone is sitting on that throne. The throne is one of the central symbols in the book of Revelation. John mentions it 47 times and refers to it in other ways more than 70 times. Why is this important? Remember who John is writing to and what this revelation is all about. The word translated "revelation" is the Greek word "apocalypsis" and some translations call this book "The Apocalypse" instead of the "Book of Revelation". An apocalypse is, typically, a book written with vivid imagery in order to help people see something that they aren't seeing. The primary message of an apocalyptic work is this: "Things are not exactly as they seem!" Our perception of reality is controlled by our limited capacity to see into the spiritual realm and to know what God is doing beyond our viewpoint. The book of Revelation says to the seven churches in Asia Minor, "You aren't seeing the whole picture, and once you do see it, your perception of your circumstances, your life, your purpose, everything, will change."

What were the Christians in Asia Minor seeing? If this book was written in or about 96 A.D. as many scholars have suggested, the Emperor Domitian was killing Christians by the tens of thousands. He was a profoundly insecure man who was mortally afraid of being overthrown. To make up for his insecurity, he ordered that all his subjects would worship him as *Domine et Deus*, Lord and God. In the ruins of Ephesus you can still see today the remains of the temple to Domitian where all Roman subjects were required to go with their pinch of incense and declare that Caesar is Lord. That's all. Many did this, but John refused.

For this sin against the emperor, John was banished to Patmos, an island prison mostly for political enemies of the state. From there, he sees the confusion and fear of the people he has left behind in Asia Minor, but, more importantly, he sees into heaven. And what he sees there is not Caesar on the throne, not Domitian or Nero ruling the universe, determining the fate of the nations, but he sees the Lord God,

exalted above every human source of power, being worshiped by creatures beyond our imagination and he sees Him as Creator and Lord and Ruler of all that is.

This is the message to the 7 churches: You need not, in fact must not, worship Caesar. He is not worthy. The one who IS worthy is seated on a magnificent throne in heaven and is surrounded by 24 elders and 4 amazing creatures who are forever giving Him praise and honor.

The thunder and lightning coming from the throne are images that draw us back to God's presence on Mt. Sinai where he gave the laws to Moses:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. (Exodus 19:16)

As I mentioned at the beginning of this series, knowing the Old Testament is key to understanding the imagery of Revelation and this is just one example.

Seven lamps are blazing in front of the throne and these lamps represent the purifying and healing that take place when beings like us come into the presence of the holy. As we saw in week one, the seven spirits of God is a way of describing the Holy Spirit in His absolute completeness and perfection. In front of the throne there is a sea of glass, as clear as crystal. Throughout John's writing, the sea represents chaos, the things that oppose God. In chapter 13 the first beast emerges out of the sea. In that day there was a popular belief that creation came out of God's contest with the forces of evil which were located in the waters of the sea. People were afraid of the sea because it represented to them the forces of chaos trying to push the orderliness of the world back into the void. And John says:

Look! A throne and before it what looked like a sea, smooth as glass, clear as crystal.

In the presence of the Almighty, there is nothing to fear, there is no overcoming power of evil that can defeat Him. Chaos is not winning and will not overcome -- despite the chaos that may be happening around the believers in Asia.

The numbers in this chapter are also interesting. Roman emperors would always have 24 bodyguards, while kings or proconsuls would have 12. But I don't think John was telling us that God needed bodyguards. Rather, the 24 elders would represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles; in other words, those who represent the people of God, His redeemed ones from under both covenants.

There are four living creatures described. Four is the symbolic number of creation and we see it in phrases like "the four corners of the earth" or "the four winds". There was an ancient saying of the rabbis that there are four mighty creatures: the mightiest among the birds is the eagle, the mightiest among domestic animals is the ox, the mightiest among the wild animals is the lion, the mightiest of them all is man. And from all these mighty creatures there proceeds, day and night, worship to the Almighty God.

I know I've told the story of the funeral service of King Louis XIV a long time ago, but it's worth repeating in this context. Louis became king of France at the age of 4 and reigned for 72 years, the longest of any modern European monarch. He called himself "the Great Monarch" and declared "I am the state!". But on September 1, 1715, he passed after a months-long struggle with senile gangrene. His funeral was attended by the royalty of Europe and was conducted according to his instructions as his body lay in a solid gold casket. He had ordered that a single candle, symbolizing his greatness, would burn above his coffin. As Bishop Massillon rose to begin the service, he did something that shocked everyone who was there. He bent over, snuffed out the candle and, in the darkness, four words were heard, "Only God is great!"

This is what John is telling the persecuted believers in the seven churches of Asia: Only God is great. Caesar will not be victorious over the power or the purposes of God. He is seated in the place of absolute authority and all creation worships Him.

The next part of the drama in Revelation 4 and 5 - John sees a scroll in the right hand of the One who sits on the throne and a mighty angel with a big voice asks the question: "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" No one is found worthy and John's reaction is fascinating - he just starts to sob and sob, he can't seem to stop. Obviously the scroll is very important and the opening of the scroll has huge significance - John is overwhelmed at the thought that no one is found worthy. But then one of the elders tells him to stop crying, that there is, in fact, a worthy one who will open the scroll and its seven seals: the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed.

We know who the overcomer is; we know it's Jesus, but even we are taken aback by the description.

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain; standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. (5:6)

A sacrificial lamb -- that's what anyone reading or hearing this text in the first century would think -- a sacrificial lamb is standing in the center of all power and authority in the universe ... in the center of the throne. God's lamb. This is an amazing picture of the exalted Jesus and would provide inexpressible comfort and hope to the persecuted followers of that Lamb. There He is, standing in the center of the throne of God, surrounded by the four living creatures which represent all of God's creation and by the 24 elders which represent all of God's chosen ones through the ages.

We've looked at the 7 spirits of God before, so we'll move on to verse 7 (vv. 7-10):

He came and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. And when He had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song:

*You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals
For You were killed and Your blood has ransomed people for God from every*

*tribe and language and people and nation
And You have caused them to become God's kingdom and His priests and
they will reign on the earth (5:7-10)*

This is the picture of the Exodus. God once took a people to Himself from under the rule of Pharaoh and He did it by the blood of lambs, smeared against the doorposts of their homes so that the angel of death would pass over them. Now, He has done it again, only this time there is only one Lamb and His blood has redeemed, not just a nation of a couple of million in Egypt, but people from every tribe, every language, every people group, every nation under heaven.

*Then I looked again, and I heard the singing of thousands and millions of
angels around the throne and the living beings and the elders. And they
sang in a mighty chorus:
"The Lamb is worthy -- the Lamb who was killed
He is worthy to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and blessing." (5:11,12)*

Scholars have made extensive studies of the so-called "imperial hymns", the shouts and chants and songs offered to the Roman Emperor. Here are some of the phrases that Christians would have heard declared about - maybe even in the presence of - the emperor:

- holy one
- glory
- salvation belongs to you
- authority
- worthy to receive power
- righteous are your judgments
- our lord and god

But the word they shouted at the emperor when he entered any city was the word "worthy" and the word that his senators shouted when he entered the great hall was the same ... "worthy".

When Revelation 5:3 announces that no one was found who was worthy to open the seven seals that concealed the perfection and completion of God's plan, you have to know that the audience would understand, as clear as day, that no Caesar was worthy, no earthly king was found who was able to open the seals ... only Jesus is worthy. And He is worthy to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing!!

If you loved Jesus, you would have found that comforting, reassuring. If you loved the world, you would have found that convicting, troubling. If you were trying to sit on the fence, you would know that you had to make a decision.

The first circle of praise was the four living creatures and the 24 elders. The second circle of praise added in the voices of thousands and millions of angels. And now we reach the outer circle of praise, in which the whole cosmos joins in exultation for the

Lamb who was slain:

And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They also sang:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the One sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever.”

And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped God and the Lamb

This is the most important chapter in the book of Revelation. If we are to understand all that comes after chapter 5, we must first do what John tells us ... “Look!” “I looked and I saw a door into heaven.” “I looked and I saw a throne.” “Then I saw a Lamb”. “Then I looked again, and I heard the singing of thousands and millions of angels around the throne, and the living beings and the elders. And they sang in a mighty chorus, “The Lamb is worthy! The Lamb who was killed! He is worthy to receive ... (everything).”

God opened a door into heaven so that John could show the people of this earth that there is one great King who is over all things, the Creator and Lord. He is the one worthy of worship -- not Caesar, not any person, not any power -- He is introduced to the audience by one of the elders as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” and when John turns to see the Lion, he sees the Lamb, looking as if it had been killed. This lamb is, somehow, miraculously, victorious -- He is standing in the center of the throne of God. He has 7 eyes, which means that He is the perfection of wisdom. He has 7 horns, which is symbolic language for the perfection of power. And how does this perfectly wise and perfectly powerful Lamb gain the victory over His enemies? By laying down his life as a sacrifice for human sin. It is sacrificial love that wins the victory. The might of Rome, the ruthless power of the emperor, is not enough to win ultimate victory.

This was a pretty new reality in John’s day -- and when I look around, I don’t think we’ve gotten hold of it yet. We still love power, using money and manipulation to get what we want. We still love being strong and forceful and influential in the way the world does those things. But, to a persecuted church, trembling in their boots at the thought of what Imperial Rome might do to them, John says, “Look, listen, things are not as they seem. You will overcome by identifying fully with Jesus, with the Lamb who was slain, rather than by trying to appease the dark powers of this present age.” It will be a message that is repeated again and again throughout the Revelation.

Love is vulnerable. It appears weak. The person who loves allows his or her heart to be broken. The lover sacrifices for the beloved one. But ultimately, love is what wins out. And so we see the Lamb standing in the center of the throne and not only creatures and elders and angels singing praise, but every creature in the entirety of all He has made shouts, “Worthy!” We join them, every time we sing or speak out His praises.

As we share the communion elements I am going to put four familiar verses on the screen. These verses describe what God has done for you, for me -- think about what they tell us about how to respond to Him, today and always. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)