

Revelation 4-5

A Peek Into Heaven's Throne Room

The strange book of Revelation

I wonder how many of you have tried reading the book of Revelation.

It is a strange book, full of strange things.

Strange numbers.

Weird animals.

Colours that have meaning.

Bizarre figures.

Unfamiliar language.

And a constant swapping of scenes between heaven and earth.

So, one minute you find yourself on earth looking at what is happening to God's people there.

But the next minute you are transported.

Suddenly you find yourself peering into heaven where the writer gives you a 'behind the scenes' look at what is going on.

As we have seen, the first few chapters are like this ... constantly swapping between heaven and earth.

So, in chapter 1 we start on earth then go into heaven.

In chapters 2 and 3 we swap back to earth again.

Revelation 4

A Sneak Peek Into Heaven ... Again (4:1)

Then, in chapter 4, we swap back to heaven again.

Look at it happen in verse 1.

John the prophet is speaking and he says:

¹After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ²At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. [Revelation 4:1-2; NIV]

The scene is clear.

It is that of a courtroom or throne room.

For some time now, John has been listening.

Back in chapter 1, verse 10, a booming, loud voice, like that of a trumpet had spoken.

John turned around and found it was the voice of someone like a son of man.

It was the Lord Jesus.

Well, now, that same voice speaks again.

The Lord Jesus himself speaks again.

But now he tells him that he is not so much to listen as to watch.

And through his retelling, we watch with him.

And as we do, many different images are paraded before us.

But did you notice the focus of the things that will be seen?

The Lord himself tell us the focus.

Look at the end of verse 1.

The Lord says...

¹... "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." [Revelation 4:1b; NIV]

So, the Lord himself is opening the door of heaven for us.

He is giving John and us a peek into heaven.

And he is showing us together the future.

But notice the thrust.

It is it not what **might** take place.

It is not what **will** take place.

No.

Rather, it is what **must** take place.

Friends, please hear this.

These things **must** take place because God has purposed these things from eternity.

And the centre of those things is his actions that were focussed in the Lord Jesus: in his birth, in his life, in his death, and in his exaltation.

And because of Jesus there is now a necessity that the rest unfolds.

These things **must** take place because of God's great plans that have their goal, the centre, and their end in him.

And here he is showing them to us in person.

Friends, I wonder if you remember the outline that I gave you of the whole book.

Do you

When they are combined together, they paint a magnificent portrait of God.

A Portrait of God

On His Throne

Now, friends, remember what John told us that Jesus said.

John told us that Jesus said he was going to tell us about 'what must take place after this.'

However, what is striking is that the picture we are presented with is not what most Christians want to see.

They want to see mysteries ... secrets ... timelines.

But instead, we see God.

And we see God on his throne.

He is royal.

He is majestic.

He is sovereign.

And if John wants to know what must take place after this, he needs to know mostly who is in charge of it.

And the one in charge is God, seated on his throne, ruling, determining, overseeing.

Whatever the future is, it is he who is in charge, ruling.

Just as the Son knows and oversees his church, so God oversees his world.

What a great comfort this is.

Friends, please understand this.

The godly do not fundamentally find security fundamentally in knowing what's coming.

No.

They find security in knowing who controls what's coming.

The psalmist knew this.

In that magnificent psalm, Psalm 121 he sings on behalf of all who go up to the temple to meet with God.

He says these words...

¹*I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?*

²*My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

³*He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;*

⁴*indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

Friends, please hear this.

You see, many who read Revelation are looking for the wrong thing.

They are looking for dates, times, and locations.

But God wants us to know him, who he is, what his interests are.

With this knowledge we will be equipped for any circumstance.

For it is he who is to be feared, not history.

The Likeness of This God

But let's look further.

I want you to notice what John sees.

He doesn't see a likeness.

No.

This God is not One who can be represented with any human images.

His likeness is simply like that of various colours rising out of precious stones and flashing through a strange rainbow cloud.

Look at it with me in your Bibles in verse 3.

John tells us.

³And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. [Revelation 4:3; NIV]

This God is one that is so removed from humans that they can't be allowed to see him face to face.

But we scarcely have time to reflect on this for then we notice twenty four thrones and twenty four elders.

These strange figures sit on their own thrones dressed in white robes with golden crowns on their heads.

And then, from the throne come flashes of lightning, and rumblings, and peals of thunder.

In front of the throne burn seven flaming torches.

And a sea of glass as clear as crystal stretches out before it.

Finally, around the throne we notice four living creatures covered with eyes.

One looks like a lion.

The second looks like an ox.

The third has the face of a human being.

And the fourth resembles a flying eagle.

Each of them has wings.

And each of them has a mouth.

Together they represent all created and living creatures.

And in unison they sing day and night in praise of the one who sits on the throne.

Together they praise the one who has existed before all time and who will continue to exist long after time ceases to exist.

Look at what they say in verse 8.

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.' [Revelation 4:8b; NIV]

And then, as the song goes on we notice that the twenty four elders fall flat on their face.

They worship this Creator God who lives forever and ever.

And they cast their crowns before his throne and join in praising the God who created all things.

Look at, listen to, verse 11.

They say...

*¹¹"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." [Revelation 4:11; NIV]*

What does it all mean?

But what does this all mean?

Why the pictures?

Why the images?

Why the characters?

Well, I think it is clear.

You use images when you can't use anything else.

Images are great ways of describing the indescribable.

They are ways of talking about the sort of God who cannot be represented with any human images.

That is, he is a God who is totally other than us, totally removed from us.

He is pure.

Majestic.

Powerful.

Faithful to his promises.

The keeper of covenants.

The God of judgment.

And the God of all mercy.

But above all, he is the God who made the world.

The Creator of all.

Responding to God

But the passage is not simply designed to explain the character of God.

It is designed to draw us in.

Here is a God to respond to.

To fear.

To be in awe of.

To be attracted to.

Here is a God enthroned.

He rules over all.

What matters is not what happens all around in the world.

What matters is who oversees it all.

And so we are drawn with the elders and the living creatures.

As we watch, we cannot help ourselves.

We find ourselves joining with all of creation in verse 11.

*¹¹“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.” [Revelation 4:11; NIV]*

Revelation 5

The Scroll

But let's return to the passage.

After all, we have really only got to half of the story.

Let's watch this scene some more.

For as all in heaven bow their knees and worships the creator God something happens.

Look at it in chapter 5, verse 1.

The hand of the Almighty God stretches out.

And John sees that in it lies a scroll.

It is a scroll that has writing on both sides and is sealed with seven seals.

Now, if you lived in John's world of emperors, you'd probably guess that this scroll is bound to be some imperial decree.

It must reflect his will for his empire.

But it is not only packed full of his will, written of both sides.

It is also completely sealed.

In other words, his will is inaccessible.

Well, that is what John sees is not some emperor but the God of all the earth.

And the scroll packed full and completely sealed undoubtedly contains his secret plans and purposes.

And our curiosity wells up within us.

What **are** those plans of the eternal Creator God.

What **is** he about in his world?

What **is** his hidden mind on our world?

Where **is** history headed?

If we don't know this, what hope have we got?

And so we wonder...

How will it work itself out?

Who is worthy to open it?

For we long to have a peek inside.

We yearn to read the scroll and so we cry out with the angelic beings in verse 2:

Who is worthy?

Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?

Who is worthy to know and unlock the secret plans of God.

And who is deserving enough to execute the hidden plans of this Almighty God of all the earth.

We look around.

The court looks around.

A search is engaged in.

And no one is found.

Look at verse 3.

No one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth can be found to open the seals.

And in verse 4 the apostle John weeps bitterly on our behalf.

For, like us, he knows the importance of that scroll.

Like us, he knows that it needs to be opened.

Don't weep!

And then a voice booms out through the courtroom in verse 5.

"Do not weep!

See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.

He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." [Revelation 5:5; NIV]

And all this seems so appropriate.

After all, we have heard of the great king David, the famous Israelite king.

We know of this lion of Judah.

Who could better than his descendent?

Looking for a Lion and finding a Lamb

And so we turn and look around.

We eagerly scan the courtyard for this lion.

But our eyes can find no king of the beasts.

There is no flowing mane.

No fierce eyes.

No frightening roar.

And no flashing teeth.

All we can see is a lamb.

It is young and white ... small and vulnerable.

It is about as far as you can get from a lion.

But then, as we look closer, we notice that it is not so white after all.

It has been butchered.

And yet it remains standing.

Friends, our translation is not as helpful here as it might be.

You see, verse 6 literally reads...

And I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a lamb standing as though it had been slain.

Friends, can you hear the strangeness of the language?

Surely if this lamb had been slain then how could it be slain?

And how do you tell that a lamb has been slain?

Probably you see that it's throat has been cut.

That is, there are the signs of blood around it's throat.

We therefore think of the Passover lamb and a death that redeems.

However, it is standing.

It is therefore not dead as it should be.

In fact, it is very much alive.

And it stands in the centre of the throne with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the world.

Horns are symbols of courage, strength, and might.

Seven implies fullness.

So, here is one full of might.

A weak lamb who is also perfect in power.

The seven eyes and seven spirits picks up various Old Testament allusions.

The seven eyes conveys notions of perfect or full sovereignty and omniscience.

The seven spirits are the seven spirits of God already mentioned earlier in Revelation.

They convey the fullness of God's Spirit in Jesus.

Can you see the imagery here.

He stands in the throne room as a humble sacrificed lamb.

And yet he has all the signs of being immensely grand, occupying a position of prominence.

And so we begin to wonder.

Could this lamb be the lion we are looking for?

And then our suspicions are confirmed.

For the lamb advances.

He approaches the throne as Lion and Lamb.

And the God who is holy holds no fear for this Lion Lamb.

He marches up to the throne of the holy and majestic Creator of all the earth before whom all creation had bowed in chapter 4.

With fearlessness he takes the scroll from the hand of him who sits on the throne.

Praise for the Lamb

And when he takes it in verse 8, the beasts and the twenty-four elders fall on their faces before the Lamb.

The courts ring with their praise in verse 9.

*“**You** are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
¹⁰You have made them to be a kingdom and priests
to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.” [Revelation 5:9–10; NIV]*

And then the court blossoms with noise.

Thousands and thousands of angelic voices join in.

Ten thousand times ten thousand angels burst into song.

Together they praise the Lamb:

*“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honour and glory and praise!” [Revelation 5:12; NIV]*

And if that were not enough, all of creation starts up.

Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth
and on the sea spurs the song into a crescendo.

*“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”
[Revelation 5:13; NIV]*

What does it all mean?

The power of the Lion/Lamb

Well friends, what does all this mean?

What do these symbols mean?

What is the passage about?

And what on earth and in heaven does it have to say to us
today?

Well, let me be bold and tell you that I think its message is
magnificently clear.

It tells us that the power to stand

The power to stand and take the scroll...

... To break its hard-set seals,

... To release and execute the plans of God,

Belongs to one alone.

It belongs to Jesus Christ who has been sacrificed.

To Jesus, who has overcome the power of death.

To the Christ, who has paid the ransom for human sin through his willing shedding of his blood.

This one and this one alone has enabled humans to enter heaven.

This one and this one alone has given humans boldness to approach the living Creator God who would otherwise be unapproachable.

The decisive moment in history

But there is more.

Friends, this sneak peek into heaven has told us something else profound.

It has told us that whatever else happens in the world we should recognise that the most critical moment has already happened.

It is in the past.

It is already accomplished.

So, our focus as we face the future is not to be with fear or worry.

If we have put our trust in the Lion of the tribe of Judah who is also the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, then we need not fear.

He holds the scroll.

He controls the future.

How to overcome/be victorious

But there is one more thing.

Do you remember the constant refrain about overcoming or being victorious in the letters to the churches?

Well, look back at verse 5 in chapter 5.

We are told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has ***triumphed***.

The Greek word used here is the same one used throughout the letters to the churches.

This is what true triumph, true victory, looks like.

It is achieved by humble obedience to the point of death.

By faithful self-sacrifice.

But there is more.

We conquer as we live by and through sacrifice.

Friends, we depend upon the Lamb.

We follow the Lamb (Revelation 14:3-4).

A Message So Profound

Friends, we live in a world of mighty world power.

We have America represented by the huge eagle.

France the Tiger.

Britain the Lion.

Russia the Bear.

China the Dragon.

We have a world of massive forces that seem destructive and out of control.

And into this world of awesome, devastating power there comes a message about another animal, a Lamb.

And its message is so different.

There are no computers.

No technological mastery.

No tanks.

No smart bombs.

No enormous armies.

No ravenous, powerful beasts.

Instead, the Christian gospel has a Lamb.

A lamb which has had its throat ripped open by our world.

But a lamb which is still standing.

A lamb which is victorious.

And this is the centre of the Christian message.

And it tells us that truth and security is not found in technology and strategy and brute strength.

Power is not found in smart bombs and tanks and nuclear arsenals and computer operated machinery.

Truth, security, wisdom, and power, finds its true locus elsewhere.

It finds its true meaning in the foolishness and weakness of a man hanging on a cross.

And I guess this is what the disciples saw.

As they stumbled into that dark cave on Easter Sunday morning a light slowly began to shine on them that burst all grief apart.

For as they looked at where he had lain they found nothing.

There was no body.

No dead Messiah.

No stench of death.

All that they could smell was the fragrance of life.

And as the truth dawned on them in the following days their eyes lifted up.

They looked beyond the shame of the cross.

And they saw that in the cross and resurrection God had proclaimed his triumph.

They realised that in the cross a battle had been fought.

A battle against the great enemies of sin, death, and the devil.

And the battle had been won.

Sin was conquered.

Death was vanquished.

Satan was overturned.

And they had a living Lord to prove it.

No one could see it but them.

But they knew it.

They knew that sooner or later the whole world would know it.

And they knew that one day the whole world would bow before the lamb, Jesus, who had conquered all that was worth conquering.

Friends, as you look around the world today.

As you see that world.

As you think about life.

I want you to do so with a heavenly perspective.

Friends, the world we live in loves power.

It loves strength.

It loves vitality.

It is entranced by might.

But the reality is that it is a world that is caught in the grip of an epidemic.

It is caught in sin.

And without the message of this Lamb, the people of this world will have to face God without him.

And without the Lamb, they have no hope.

Without the Lamb there is no future.

Without the Lamb, they will have to face God on their own.

And without the Lamb, facing this God will be a terrifying prospect.

Without the Lamb, they will be banished from God's presence forever.

They will be excluded from everything good that he has and will shower upon them.

Friends, God's purpose in his world is in the hands of his Son.

The future of the peoples of the earth is in the hands of God's Son.

The destiny of every individual is related to their attitude to the Lamb.

And if you are Christian, you have decided to line up with this.

You have decided to give your life to announcing the weak but strong message of a Lamb who looks slain but is in reality standing.

Will you line up with the Spirit of God as well?

Will you do the task of the bride?

Will you live as your Lord?

Will you walk in the steps of the Lamb.

Friends, God is looking toward a day when there will be a multitude from every nation gathered around his throne.

A multitude from all tribes and peoples and languages.

Standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

Crying out with a loud voice:

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!

If you are a Christian, you are lining up with this.

So, will you go and announce this great news to the world.

And will you follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

This is the role of God's people, the bride of Christ.

This is what the Holy Spirit is doing.

Will you speak this great news to the world?

Will you invite people to hear about Jesus?

Will you live in the likeness of Jesus.

Will you join the Father, the Lamb, the Spirit, and the Bride of Christ in making Christ known.

This message that we remember here is the message that the world needs to hear.