

A View of the Throne

Revelation 4

Two weeks ago we concluded our study of the letters to the 7 churches. We ended with the letter to Laodicea – a self-reliant, self-oriented church. They were rich and needed nothing. But they were blind. Their self-reliance and self-orientation were due to a failure to see things as they really are. And John's vision in chapter 4 is exactly what the church in Laodicea and the church today needs to see, for here we see things as they really are.

(Read text)

If you could have anything in the whole world, what would you ask for? Dream home? Health? A great marriage? This morning we see that the single greatest thing we could receive is a true view of the glory of God as He is.

1. This vision of chapters 4 and 5 are central to the whole book. The book of Revelation is a word from Christ to his church – all of it. In chapter 1 we are introduced to Christ Jesus himself in his magnificence and glory. In chapters 2-3, he speaks to the church, as the Lord of the church. Beginning in chapter 6 we have a series of visions and prophecies all dealing with things that the church must endure as King Jesus sovereignly guides and ordains human history to its final culmination in the judgment of all that is evil and the final renewal of all things for those who belong to him. Here in chapters 4 and 5 we see that eternal reality that lies behind all that is temporal. Here we see God reigning and ruling in all glory and power and righteousness. Everything flows to and runs from this central scene.
2. This text is critical to our life. The single most defining and determinative issue of your life is whether or not you acknowledge the reality that is presented here. If you are not a Christian today, it is, in part, because you are not yet convinced that the God presented here actually exists. You haven't yet come to the conclusion that you are his creation and creature and therefore you owe him your love and worship – and will be justly condemned if you refuse. Once you become convinced that this God actually exists as he is presented here, you will be hungry to hear the gospel story of how this God made a way for you to be rescued from your sin and reconciled to his glory. The single most defining and determinative issue of your life – both in this world and for all eternity – is whether or not you acknowledge the reality of God as he is presented here.

This is true for all of us. The sad fact is that none of us believe this is ultimate reality as we should. We say we believe that God is real, that he is sovereign and good, but we so easily live as though those things weren't true.

We easily serve ourselves – not the God who created us.

We rely on ourselves – not the God who controls all things.

Our lives are formed as much by our culture as by our God.

My prayer is that God would use His word to help mold us this morning.

I. The Summons

Rev. 4:1 *After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."*

"After this" – the sequence of this heavenly vision matters. The fact that this vision occurs immediately after the letters to the 7 churches is no accident. The seven letters revealed a struggling, sinful, persecuted church. Two of the 7 churches are in such a bad way, spiritually speaking, that Jesus has nothing but rebukes and warnings for them. Two of them are a mixture of bad and good – they are doing some things well, and yet heresy and sexual immorality are being tolerated, and Jesus commands them to repent. Only two of the churches receive high marks, but they are suffering severe persecution.

This is the church of Jesus Christ! The church Jesus had said he would build. If you were a member of that early church, there would seem to be many reasons for discouragement. Frankly, it doesn't seem to be going that well. But Jesus invites John to see things from a new perspective – from the perspective of the Eternal Throne Room of heaven.

Derek Thomas: "The upward glance is a sign of a new perspective on things. John is being reminded that God is in control. The church may be languishing; Satan may be doing his worst; but God is reigning on high." (44)

This vision, and the book of Revelation as a whole, is given to the church to teach us to look at things from a new, heavenly perspective. It is a mistake, when we look at the church, to look only at the church! It is a mistake when we look at the world, to see only the world. It is a mistake when we see our lives, to see only our lives. The true reality of the church, the world, and your life is only seen when it is seen from the perspective of heaven!

The book of Revelations is given so that we can "see" things as they really are! The veil between eternity and time is drawn back so that we can see Jesus at work in his church, at work in this, his world, and at work in his people – as sovereign Lord and King!

Derek Thomas: "Having *heard* in the letters of chapters 2 and 3 that Jesus reigns over the church, John is now given a *sight* of Jesus reigning in glorious triumph."

II. The Sight

In Revelation 4 we are taken into the most awe-inspiring place, the most worship-inducing scene in all of reality – the throne room of the living God. It would be easy to get lost in the details of this vision: a rainbow, a sea of glass, lamps of fire, living creatures with 6 wings and eyes all around. But the details are not the primary point. They are there to serve the primary point – to help us see the truth of the glory of God and Christ Jesus the Son.

A. A Sovereign God

4:2 *At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven with one seated on the throne.*

We need to remember that the pictures and images are significant, not for their appearance but for what they point to. They are symbols pointing to something. John sees a throne – but there is not a literal, material throne in heaven where God sits. God is a Spirit – he doesn't sit. But he does reign! He does rule, with all power and wisdom and might! He does exist as the sovereign, living Lord of all – and that's what the image shows us.

Beeke: "The word *throne* occurs in the New Testament sixty-two times, forty-seven of these are in Revelation. The book is dominated by the idea that there is a throne in heaven at the center of all things and that there is a glorious ONE who sits upon that throne." (178)

There is marvelous good news here for a suffering, struggling church. There is a throne in heaven – and someone is seated there! This world, and the details of our lives, are not unfolding by random chance, or by the powers that we see. This universe is a moral universe with a moral center. This universe is the polar opposite of random. Every molecule moves by order from this throne.

B. A Glorious and Beautiful God

Rev. 4:3 *And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.*

On the throne there is a "Someone," and he is beautiful beyond telling. That's why John uses the words, "he had the appearance of" – he looked something like this. Actual words don't exist that can contain and describe the glory of God. The best John can do is to use beauties that we know to give us some sense of the beauties that are yet unseen.

The image is of glowing, colorful luminescence and light. Jasper can be many colors, the same for carnelian. They are both gems formed by sand, and thus have a glass-like opaque appearance. The “sea of glass like crystal” speaks of a brilliant, shimmering expanse of light. Think of this as a sea of diamond, reflecting light in perfect clarity and purity and brilliance. The imagery is meant to convey refulgent beauty and light like we’ve never seen or imagined.

In a world so often darkened by sin and fear and disease and death, it is good and necessary for us to realize that what we see is not all there is. In fact, at the center of things that are, there is beauty and glory and eternal light. And that beauty will win. It has already won! The light shown in the darkness, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it.

C. A Faithful God

Rev. 4:4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.

There is some debate as to the identity of these elders, but I think the most plausible understanding is that this is the church, represented by the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. In other words, they represent the church of all ages, gathered together as one around the throne of God in heaven.

But the most important thing to see is the faithfulness of God. Notice that the elders, the people of God in heaven, are doing precisely what Jesus promised they would do and wearing exactly what Jesus promised to give those who endure. They are robed in white, seated on thrones, and wearing crowns. Exactly as Jesus had promised.

3:21 The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

God is faithful to his people. The churches need to know this. The church will be persecuted. The church will be attacked by the world, betrayed by the flesh, and tempted by the Devil. Men will fail. But God will be faithful. We will receive, in Christ, all that God has promised to us in him. No matter how hard your path, no matter how great your weakness, you can trust today in the faithfulness of God.

D. A Holy God

Verses 5-14 manifest the overwhelming holiness of God. What does John see?

1. Thunder and lightning. Boys and girls, thunder is a wonderful, frightening sound, isn't it? The sheer magnitude of it and the deep, cracking and rumbling just sounds like a voice from another world. It can be so loud and so present that it literally shakes

things! Have you ever felt your house tremble, vibrating with the sound of the thunder? It's amazing and frightening.

2. Seven torches of fire in front of the throne, signifying the Spirit of God.
3. The 4 living creatures: full of eyes, each with 6 wings, representing all creatures on earth. Four is the number of Earth. These creatures signify all creation worshipping its Creator Lord and King – nonstop! "Day and night they never cease to say..."

III. The Song

Notice what they sing:

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

Derek Thomas mentions a very interesting fact:

"In the Bible, where God's name is mentioned, it is qualified by the adjective 'holy' more often than it is by all the other qualifiers put together."

If you were to ask people today to describe what God is like, what attribute do you think they would mention most often? I'd be willing to bet good money that it would be "love." God is love. He is loving. I was talking with a young man a while ago about the spiritual life at his Christian college and he said, "It's pretty good. But the kids just haven't been taught. The only thing they really know and believe is that God is love."

But the overwhelming biblical description of God is "holy." The holiness of God is the Godness of God. He is not like us. He is other. Unrivaled. Eternal. Needing nothing. Full of all good and glory. Everything comes from him, belongs to him, and is to be given to him.

We see this precisely in the worship of the 24 elders.

Rev. 4:9-11 *And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."*

The crowns are the crowns given to the church as a reward for their endurance. These are the crowns Jesus promised. But in the presence of God, the church cast those crowns before the throne because the only being in heaven who is truly **worthy** of crowns is the living God! Everything exists by his will and according to his power. He is the Eternal Source of all –

everything outside of God, including the angels, is derivative. And so God, and God alone, stands necessarily worthy of all worship and glory and honor and praise!

He is **worthy** of all *glory*. In other words, God and God alone is worthy of worship. Worthy of all adoration. He is the eternal glory and beauty behind all the beauty we see.

He is worthy of all *honor*. Honor is what we give to things that matter, things that are supremely worthwhile and weighty and right. This weekend we honor those who gave their life for their country. There is weight, a value to that sacrifice that is worthy of honor. God is worthy of honor as the sovereign God.

Worthy of *power* – He is the faithful God. He exercises his omnipotent power only and always in ways that are eternally good and for eternally good ends.

Why did the early church need this vision? Because they needed to be reminded of the way things really are. They were, like us, often filled with fear. They were being persecuted by the mighty Roman empire. They were being ostracized by their own communities by refusing to participate in the idolatry of the pagan temples. The church was beset with false teachers and worldliness. To human eyes, the church seemed so weak, so powerless. But things are not the way they seem. They needed to see their identity and destiny in light of the glory of their God.

We need the same. We can be cynical Christians – we believe but we struggle to trust. The faith we profess doesn't really bring joy. We are still paralyzed with shame and fear. God has revealed himself to you on purpose. He wants you to see the truth of who he is, and what he is like. To that end he has given us his own Son. If you want to see the truth of God up close and in person, go to Jesus Christ.

* There your blinded heart will find the breathtaking beauty of God on display. His love, grace, justice, holiness, and power are all held before us in vibrant colors in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

* There is grace so deep, so free, so abundant, it can destroy your natural cynicism with the revelation of infinite love. Worship centers on a Someone. That Someone is Jesus. God wants you to see your identity and destiny in the light of his glory and power.

Pray that God would open your eyes to see the truth of his beauty. Turn off the TV and put away Facebook for a while and engage your heart with his glory and beauty. Read his word to get to know him. Come to church, week after week, to gain heaven's perspective. Place the truths of your life – the truth of your weakness, your sin, your fears, failures, and shame –

take those things and place them under the light of the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ. See things as they really are – in him. And then worship.