

“A Glimpse into the Throne Room of God”

Introduction: Pastor and theologian Tom Wright, who often finds himself part of a long processional of clergy making their way into a particular cathedral for a special worship service, recalls that during one of these processions, the senior pastor walking next to him looked at the worship bulletin, smiled, and remarked, “Ah, I see that we have Revelation 4 as one of our readings today. It’s one of the two most wonderful chapters in the whole Bible!” In response, Wright asked the obvious question: “What’s the other one, then?” The pastor’s smile grew even broader as he answered, “Why, Revelation 5 of course!”

After our look at Revelation 4 today and 5 next week, I don’t know if you’ll agree with this pastor or not; you may still have other favorite chapters, but these two are certainly hard to beat. In broad outline, they celebrate God as Creator (4) and as Redeemer (5). They celebrate the God who precedes all things and who is now in the process of bringing all things to fulfillment. But more specifically, they are intended to bring hope and confidence to a people who might be wondering if God really is all powerful and all loving, given all the bad things that have been happening to them, and as a result, are tempted to compromise their faith or maybe give up altogether.

What God does for them, through the vision he gives to John, is to pull back the curtain that separates the dimensions of heaven and earth, revealing to them his throne room, or the control center of the universe. What he wants them to see is that although the times may be troubling, things are not only as they seem. So let’s begin by seeing what this control center reveals about the character and person of God and then consider how worship can keep us centered there.

I. The Character and Person of God

A. Remember from chapter 1 that John, the overseer of a number of churches in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) had been sent into exile in the mid-90’s A.D., a time of great persecution of the church by the Roman authorities. John was banished to an island prison called Patmos for preaching and teaching that Jesus, and not Caesar, was Lord. The vision that he received was intended to strengthen both him, and the church. In this part of the vision, John was shown an “open door,” and invited to “come up and see.” Now, I think it is immensely helpful if we can get out of our minds the thought that God somehow outfitted John with a little jet pack which then enabled John to “shoot up” through some little space to some heavenly level. More accurate, I have come to understand, is to think of heaven as being very near us, a different dimension, if you will, God’s dimension of reality. When we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven,” we’re not praying to a God who is far, far away, but right next to us, in another dimension. Therefore, this dimension is something we enter not by use of an external, high tech form of transportation but by God opening our spiritual eyes so that we can see behind the scenes into the reality of what is going on in God’s realm and how it intersects with our own, earthly, human realm.

B. Sometimes, by the way, you hear the charge: “he (or she) is so heavenly minded that he’s no earthly good.” But God seems to be revealing here that those who can see more and more of the heavenly realm will be of the most earthly good because things here on earth are not only as they seem; there is more. So, when God does pull the curtain back for John, and for his

churches, and for us, what “more” are we privileged to see? Amazing sights, to be sure! “Behold!” John says it twice. Not, as the NIV and others somewhat mundanely have it, “I saw there before me,” but “Behold!” “Wicked awesome!” might be a current phrase akin to it. And what he sees at the very first is a throne, and not only that, but someone seated on it. What is significant about this is that there is, after all, a control center of the universe and it is occupied; it has not been abandoned, as events in the dimension of earth, from tornadoes to terrorist attacks, might lead us to conclude.

C. Who, then, is the one on the throne? What is this being like? The vision portrays him in a variety of ways.

1. In appearance, he is dazzling in beauty, as the stones jasper and carnelian (ruby) suggest. Jasper actually appears later in the vision to describe the radiance and glory of God when heaven joins earth in God’s new creation (21:11).

2. In character, the one on the throne is portrayed as merciful and faithful and just. Specifically, his mercy and faithfulness to his creation is depicted by the rainbow around the throne, the rainbow being the symbol of God’s promise to never again destroy the earth by flood. And his justice is portrayed by the flashes of lightening and rumblings of thunder that come from the throne. This thunderstorm imagery goes all the way back to Mount Sinai, and was a way of declaring to the Israelites how awesome and powerful and holy God is. Significantly, such thunderstorms appear in each of the three series of judgments on evil that follow the vision of God’s throne room (8:5; 11:19; 16:18-21). They tell us, warningly, that in dealing with God, we are dealing with something like nuclear power that we must not take lightly or play around with. They tell us, confidently, that ultimately, God’s justice will be done.

3. Then there are the seven torches of fire, which represent the illuminating, purifying, and full healing power of the Spirit that are at God’s disposal.

4. Finally, we are given a marvelous picture of the sovereignty of God in the glassy sea that is found at the foot of the throne. The sea represented all that was chaotic. It was the place from which the evil beast came. In God’s world, as it currently is now, evil is present and dangerous. But in the vision, before the throne, the sea is smooth; the chaos is present but it is not out of God’s control and, as it sits still at his feet, it suggests that evil is somehow contained within his sovereign purposes. Noteworthy is that in the new creation, there is no sea (21:1); God’s promise is that at that point, even the threat of evil will no longer exist.

So, in the midst of the chaos that the seven churches were experiencing, in the midst of the bad things that were happening, in the midst of the temptation of some to compromise and others to give up, we’re given a feast for the eyes and the heart, a vision that says things are not only as they seem. There is more. There is a control room in the universe and the one who sits there is dazzlingly beautiful, he is merciful and faithful and just and knowing and healing and totally in control, even though it may not always seem like it.

Illustration: Last week, I went to the Walmart Vision Center to explore the possibility of some new eyeglasses, as I’m not seeing things as clearly as I used to. I found some frames but when the woman who was helping me saw my prescription, and noticed that it was almost 18 months old, she encouraged me to go back to the eye doctor before filling it as my eyes very likely had

changed again. I appreciated her council. While she wanted to sell me new glasses, she wanted even more to have me seeing clearly. God wants us to see clearly, to see him clearly on the throne, because the clarity of our vision determines the quality and character of our life. The more clearly we can see this heavenly vision, and ponder its implications, the more clearly we will be able to see our way through the fog of this earth.

II. The Centering Power of Worship

A. One of the things we can do to help us see clearly, this chapter suggests, is worship. It is actually what John was doing when he first received this vision (1:10). Even though he was in a bad way, he still sought to center himself through worship. That's actually what we also see modeled by both the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. The four living creatures most likely represent the whole of animate creation. The other day, as I was riding my bike up Asbury Street toward Topsfield Road, I noticed a sign on the right, across from a farm stand, which read: "Go Slowly: Pigs, Dogs, Sheep, People." Those four kind of represent the whole group that a driver, or rider, needs to watch out for. So in this vision, one like a lion, one like an ox, one like a man, and one like an eagle, represent all of God's created creatures who are singing a praise song to him centered on his holy, powerful, and eternal character. And then the twentyfour elders, most likely representing the twelve tribes of Israel and the church before Jesus and the twelve apostles and the church after the coming of Jesus, they're singing as one congregation and praising God as creator and sustainer of all things.

In fact, notice as you read Scripture that throughout it, when things seem to be going badly, that people turn to praising God as creator. It's because they recognize that as Creator, he, and he alone, has the power to do anything about how others have tried to destroy his good work. And so we see Jesus calming the storm and healing the sick and exorcising the possessed because as creator, he has ultimate power and authority over what he has made.

B. So, with a glimpse of the throne room in mind, with a picture of the glorious, dazzling, faithful, merciful, and just God on the throne in that room, worship helps us to stop and contemplate and respond to that picture, centering our minds and our hearts on the fact that what we see all around us, from tornadoes to terrorists, is not all there is. Things are not only as they seem.

C. Eugene Peterson describes the centering power of worship in this way:

Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God . . . We worship so that we live in response to and from this center, the living God. Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. . . . If there is no center, there is no circumference . . . Life lurches from one partial satisfaction to another, interrupted by ditches of disappointment. [*Reversed Thunder*, 60]

So let us join in with those living creatures and that redeemed congregation as we praise the holy one who sits on the throne in the control center of the universe.