

Live with an Eternal Perspective

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[0 : 00] As we begin, let me introduce you to a man who was dubbed Mr. Eternity. So going back to the millennium, the Sydney fireworks display, at the end of that great display around the harbour area, in great big 90-foot high neon letters stood this word, Eternity. And people around the world find themselves asking, what's that about? But it actually was in memory of a famous Sydney citizen of the 1920s. He really came to prominence. This was a guy by the name of Arthur Stace.

Arthur was homeless, and one day he happened upon a church that had their doors open for a cup of tea or coffee. And as he described later, I went in for a rock bun, and I came out with the rock of ages.

He met Jesus, and his life was changed to the extent that every night of his life, for decades, he would go into the streets of Sydney, and with a piece of chalk would inscribe on the walls or on the pavements this single word, Eternity. He was a man absolutely captivated by this new perspective on life, that now he had the joy of eternity with Jesus to look forward to, that now he was living with that sense there's more to life than just here and now, and he desperately wanted the people around him to be aware of it too. And so as we begin, I think it's important for us to ask ourselves, do we have that perspective? Would we say that that captivates us? Does that influence how we live?

Does it influence our faith? Is it represented and reflected in what we bear witness to? Eternity is so important. It's so important to the perspective of the book of Revelation.

Here in chapter 4, the emphasis is very much on the everlasting rule and majesty of God on the throne. Next week, we have that glorious chapter, chapter 5, where we think of the lion who is the lamb, the everlasting glory and reign of the Lord Jesus. But almost every section of the book, we're thinking about themes of eternal judgment and eternal salvation. We're being reminded about eternity. And it's for a particular purpose. So John is given this vision for the sake of a first century group of believers who are being persecuted. They're this tiny minority and life is hard.

[2 : 48] And eternity is always designed to be an encouragement to the people of God. An encouragement to recognize the God of eternal glory sits on the throne. Not Caesar, not an emperor, not any power that we see around us today. And there is, because of the Lord Jesus, there is eternal hope for the people of God. And so this chapter really calls us to live with an eternal perspective.

Jesus gives John the next part of his vision that we're going to see a door open to heaven. And we're going to see the throne room of heaven. And we're going to hear the worship of heaven.

And Jesus gives John that vision for the church. Because I think, not just in the first century, but in every century, believers will always struggle to really and truly believe that eternity is more real than the here and now. We will always struggle to think that beyond the chaos that we see in our lives or in our news, there is a God who is working out his saving plan. And we always need to be reminded that the coming of Jesus, which is part of God's eternal plan, is the source and the promise of unbreakable joy and glory to last for eternity. So let's get into our text. Let's look at these first couple of verses and let's think about this door that's open. John says, after this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. That the open door to heaven is a signal of access to God. That Jesus in this vision opens the door so that John has the privilege of seeing something of God's glory. And that's exactly what Jesus came to do while on earth. We think about the moment of his death. And as Jesus died, the great temple curtain was torn in two.

The barrier, the no access sign to God's presence torn open. The door to God, to life with God, to fellowship with God is open. Access comes through Jesus. He gives the vision, but he also gives the access. So the door is open, and then we hear the voice speak. Come up here and I will show you what must take place after this. Think about that privilege. Here is the God of infinite glory, and one of his representatives invites John to come up into his presence. He comes into the throne room of God, and he will be shown that everything that follows, all that we will see next year when we get into Revelation again, of God's judgments, of the realities of spiritual battle, of God's people who both suffer and are protected. All of that stands under the rule of God's sovereign will.

And as John sees this door standing open, and he hears the voice inviting him up, verse 2, but once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

[6 : 11] Now think about what that means for our day to day. It is not chaos that governs this world. It is not the forces of nature that determine how life goes. The universe is actively ruled by Almighty God who sits on the throne. And this throne room is the control center for the universe. I don't know if you've ever been able to go into a control tower at an airport or at a train station, but if you've had that experience, or even if you've seen images, then you probably have a sense and appreciation that what can look so confusing to the untrained eye, what can seem so out of control is actually well-ordered by the person who is in control. God is in control. He is on His throne. And it's so significant that before John sees anything of this feature vision, he first sees behind the scenes, he first sees God sitting on the throne. The eternal God rules.

I read this week an old essay by C.S. Lewis. It was called Learning in Wartime. In that essay, he was asking the question during the First World War, is it appropriate for people to go to university and to try and study and to do the normal stuff of life while there's these great events happening?

And he was reflecting to this group of students to say that, do you know what, people have always been living on the edge of a precipice. People have in every generation always lived under the shadow of something more important that seems to dominate. And what Lewis did was to remind the students gathered there in the heat of the First World War is that that's something for the Christian, and it should be something for all, that's something more that overshadows is eternity.

You know, we live every day under the shadow of the reality of heaven and hell. And we have to figure out, how do we live life? How do we work? How do we live with faith in light of that?

And this vision speaks to us of good news in light of eternity, the good news that God is on the throne, that this world is not spinning out of control, and that Jesus has come to open the door to eternal life.

[8 : 51] That in Jesus' death and resurrection, the King of death has been defeated, and that Jesus' resurrection life is the first fruits of future resurrection, eternal life.

And so this vision of the door is a vision that calls us to faith, because it calls us to live with that eternal perspective, to know that God rules eternally, that that would be a source of hope for us in this anxious age that we live in, that the King on the throne gives promise that in the end, light always will overcome the darkness. Well, let's move from the door to think about the throne, verses 3 to 6. And just before we get into the text, to recognize, that sometimes we find ourselves asking the question, and maybe we're asking the question of the throne, what's it like? Which at one level is a very basic question, what's something like? But sometimes it can be really difficult to answer, especially if we're talking about a concept that's utterly unfamiliar or foreign to the person that we're trying to explain it to.

So what we typically do in that case is we will draw on what is known and what is familiar. So the classic example, you know, for anyone who's ever eaten any exotic meat, and somebody asks, what's it like? Ah, well, it tastes kind of like chicken.

You know, we know chicken, chicken is safe, chicken is familiar, chicken tastes good. We always compare any new meat to chicken, maybe to beef. When John comes in this vision to the throne room, he is encountering a glory beyond his and our wildest imagination. It is an indescribable glory.

And so John has to reach for language that is available to him, even while he recognizes the limits of language to describe God's glory. And so we'll hear, as John begins to describe the throne for us, he'll say, well, it had the appearance of, and it is like. And so he draws on things that are known and familiar and that are good to help us in some way to help us in some way to get a sense of the glory that he saw.

[11 : 31] And he also draws on what is known from the Old Testament to help us to get a sense of what he saw. That's why we read Isaiah 6, because that's where John goes in his thinking.

So having said that, three themes to pick up on as John describes the throne. The first is the theme of glory. Verse 3, the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. Now, this is not saying that God, the King of glory, looks like two colors of stone, precious stones. He's saying that just as a precious stone, regardless of how you turn it, will always shine with glory. There's always new facets of glory on display. So it is with our God. He is glorious and wonderful and beautiful and good.

A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. Rainbows don't shine like emeralds, but emeralds are beautiful. And rainbows speak wonderful words, because the rainbow reminds us of the covenant that God made with Noah. It reminds us that God loves his creation. He loves his people.

He shows covenant faithfulness. He preserved the world and people on it so that Jesus could come, so people could hear good news and be saved. And the rainbow is like a circle. And in the center of the circle is the throne, the God of covenant faithfulness and love is at the center. And then verse 5, thinking about glory from the throne, came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Now John's going to the Old Testament again. He's going to Mount Sinai. He's going to the book of Exodus. When God met with this people on the mountain, he's saved them and he's called them to himself and he's telling them something about himself. He invites them to come to be his people, but at the same time there is that recognition that he is a God of unapproachable glory and holiness and awe and splendor. And so John's vision of the throne speaks to us of the glory of God. But it also speaks to us, secondly, of the authority of God. So look at verse 4 with me. Surrounding the throne were 24 other thrones, and seated on them were 24 elders. And so we're going to come across these kind of numbers throughout the book of Revelation here. Most likely it represents the Old Testament and New Testament church at worship, the 12 tribes of Israel plus the 12 apostles. And they each have a throne, and those thrones are in a circle, and at the center there is God's throne. And the lesson, God rules.

The Lord deserves all authority. And just as it was, again going back to the time of the Exodus, when all the people of Israel had their tents and they were told to make them into a circle, right in the middle was God's tent. God with his people. The God of glory and holiness with his people. Another fascinating detail, verse 6. Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass clear as crystal. So imagine now a sea that is flat calm, so you're able to see your own face reflected in it. This is significant because if you read the Bible, especially the Old Testament, you'll find the sea represents a place of chaos and evil, a place of the anti-God forces. But here there is flat calm that speaks of victory, that speaks of peace secured. Again, to stick with the book of Exodus, imagine the people of God, they've just been led out of Egypt, and they've just crossed through the Red Sea, and they've watched the Red Sea engulf the armies of Egypt. So they see their enemies have been judged, and then the sea is flat calm. Speaks of salvation. Think about Jesus on this earth, stilling the storms. The God of glory and authority. The God who is more powerful than the forces of evil, who at the cross would defeat evil. The throne speaks of authority. But we also need to recognize, thirdly, that the throne speaks of eternity, because central to the worship of heaven is the fact that the one who sits on the throne is eternal. So maybe you noticed, this to read from verse 8 now, that John quotes from Isaiah 6, the song of the seraphim, but there's an extra line. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. Isaiah continues, the whole earth is filled with His glory. But here it's different. What's the focus of praise now?

[17:09] That God is the one who was, and is, and is to come. This is the fifth time in four chapters, we've either heard God being praised because He's the one who was, and is, and is to come, or because He's the first and the last in the Alpha and the Omega. This is clearly designed to be comfort for God's people. In John's vision, that God reigns eternally with glory and authority.

He hasn't lost His power or grip. He never will lose it. He will never stop showing love and faith. It's the point of the vision. And so then we begin to see why we need an eternal perspective that's drawn from the throne room of heaven. You and I need to remember the one who sits on the throne.

The one that we are invited to call as Christians, our Father in heaven. We have that sense of intimacy and love and relationship, and it's wonderful. At the very same time is this infinitely, eternally glorious God who rules according to His will and saving purposes.

So when believers in the first century and believers in the 21st century, we feel like we're giving up a lot, and we're making sacrifices, and we're feeling opposition, and we feel like our message is going nowhere, and we're asking ourselves, is it worth it? We can say, yes, it is worth it because He is infinitely worthy. So we remember the one who sits on the throne, and we also need to remember that the throne is central. It's amazing the way the vision deliberately keeps circling back to that. So there's the rainbow circle, and there's the throne in the middle.

There's the circle of thrones, and there's God's throne in the center. Why do we need that? Because I think we're always tempted to move the furniture around, to say, well, in this moment, let's not make God central. Let's make me and my will and my agenda central.

[19 : 31] So often the Bible speaks about the sin of idolatry, which has at its heart that instinct to make someone or something take the place of God. I will give glory and worth to this person, to this thing, that this is where I'm going to look for significance and meaning and security and purpose.

And when we do that, we sin against God. And when we do that, we will always find ourselves being disappointed because we're asking some created thing to take the place that belongs to eternal God.

And no one and nothing can bear that weight. And so we have an opportunity, I think, this season, this season of Advent, this season as we reflect on the glory of God with us, on the glory of Christ for us, to refocus, to remember that it's His throne that's central. And that really takes us to the third aspect of John's vision. It takes us to the worship that we see in verses 6 to 11.

Kind of drawing on what we've just said, Paul Tripp, the biblical counselor, he's super helpful on recognizing this. Lots of people have over time. That you cannot divide the world into worshipers and non-worshippers because by nature we are all made to worship. That actually what divides us isn't what I worship and you don't. The point of division is what do we worship?

What is it that we think deserves all my attention? What is it that captures my heart? What is it that I give my energy to? That reflects what I think is my true treasure.

[21 : 41] It's my true treasure found here on earth or found in heaven. We all worship. It's where is that worship directed? And so we come to the final part of John's vision and what we see is this worship scene where those who have an eternal perspective, those who are in the throne room, those who see the God of glory, they are joyfully worshiping the eternal God and the people of God are invited to be part of that. So our great need is to find this same perspective, that we would share this same source of worship, that we would find our satisfaction and joy in the God who is described here. The first thing to notice in the section is who are the worshipers?

This is interesting. Verse 7, the first living we've got around the throne, there's four living creatures. The first like a lion, second like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth like a flying eagle. And it's these who day and night are always singing praise to God. So the scene, again, we read Isaiah 6, it sounds like Isaiah 6, except instead of the seraphim, instead of that rank of angels, in John's vision we get these four living creatures. So on one level the point is that the great heavenly beings lead the worship of God. But I think these living creatures remind us that all of creation is made to worship God. Here is the noble lion, here is the strong ox, here is the wise man, here is the swift eagle. And notice too, they're covered with eyes. Often in sort of these vision scenes, it is God that seemed to be covered with eyes as a sense of His knowing everything and seeing everything, having the right perspective. But here it's His representatives. And as nothing is hidden to these representatives, as they have a true perspective, as they see God's glory, we find them worshiping day and night. So the four living creatures worship and the 24 elders also worship.

Verse 10, there's this call and response to the living creatures of giving glory, honor, and thanks. And then the 24 elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever. So the worshiping people of God represented here in the vision, as they recognize the superior glory and honor of God on His throne, they lay their crowns before Him. We serve at His pleasure.

To Him and to Him alone be all glory, praise, and honor. You could think of the greatest choir experience, worship experience you've ever been part of here on earth and recognize that what John is invited to see turns the volume, turns the glory up infinitely.