

Sing!

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[0 : 00] Isaiah receives a revelation of the glory of the Lord's, and he is then commissioned to serve him as a prophet.

And as we read Isaiah 6 and the commissioning of Isaiah and the vision of God's glory, we'll see connections with what we'll then read in Revelation chapter 4.

So first of all, in Isaiah chapter 6, let's hear God's word together. Amen.

We thank God for his word. An region of Asia in 95 AD. One of the letters to the seven churches is addressed to this city of Ephesus.

So at the time, 95 AD, the emperor is a man named Domitian, and it's a time when the cult of the emperor is on the rise.

[1 : 47] And in particular, this region of Asia where Ephesus is, they're really excited about the emperor cult. So if you were to walk around the city of Ephesus, you would find great new public buildings devoted to the god Caesar.

You would find that there were festival times through the year that were devoted to the god Caesar and to the Roman pantheon of gods.

Even as you went to the marketplace to buy your meat, you would find that meat would have been sacrificed to a variety of gods. So as a new Christian in Ephesus in 95 AD, you would absolutely be feeling the squeeze.

Perhaps you may have already lost your job facing slander from a wider community who doesn't understand this new religion and who Jesus is.

Maybe some of your friends are already in prison. How is the book of Revelation going to be good news to a group of Christians in Ephesus who are worn down, who are under pressure, who are losing their first love?

[3 : 10] And that's not just external pressure. Internally, you can read about this in chapter 2, there are false teachers coming to Ephesus, and they're encouraging the church to also worship idols.

To kind of blend their Christianity with the prevailing culture. How is Revelation good news to that church? Come back now to Edinburgh in Europe in 2019.

How do we find ourselves today? Our church, the church, is small. It's marginalized. In some places, openly mocked.

And again, Christianity is feeling the squeeze. That it's fine for faith to be private, but it's very difficult to live your faith in public. Perhaps you've had the experience of trying to live faithfully, trying to share your faith, and you're met with perhaps apathy, or met with very resistant atheism, or there's simply misunderstanding and a lack of care about what you hold precious.

How is Revelation good news for you and me today? Revelation 1 is really significant opening.

[4 : 44] Let's read together. Verse 1. That one verse answers a lot of the who and the why.

It tells us where did this revelation come from. And we've got this wonderful process where it comes from the Father to the Son, and from the Son to the angels, and it's delivered to the Apostle John, who is a prisoner in the island of Patmos, persecuted because of his faith.

And it's given to prepare the people of God for what must soon take place. And notice verse 2. John testifies to everything he saw. That is the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. What we read in Revelation is the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ that's come through John.

And verse 3. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what's written in it, because the time is near.

[5 : 58] There is blessing from God for us as the people of God in the book of Revelation. But perhaps, if you're anything like me, your first response to Revelation is not, this is a place to find

blessing.

It's more, it's a place to find confusion. There are lots of images, and there are battles, and there are judgments, and it can feel so difficult to access. Sometimes it reads more like a graphic novel than it does anything else in the New Testament.

And so we can be tempted to leave it to one side as something that's not for us, maybe for another time and another place. So our goal in these weeks to come is not a small goal, but it's a significant goal.

It's that we would see the gospel in the book of Revelation. That we would be, as the people of God, encouraged and find hope from what we read in this.

Because when we pay it all back, we think, what is the key message that we find in Revelation? We discover that in Christ, the future is certain.

[7 : 12] We discover that Christ will return, and that there will be an end to evil. That for the people of God, for the church of God, we will share in the victory of the Lord Jesus.

That he offers to us a guarantee for our future and for our eternity. That we are being invited to know the Lord who stands over history and over his world.

And so there is good news for us in this book. If you've read it, or if you've even dipped into it, you will know that there is a lot of action that takes place.

But it's helpful again for us to think, what are the key events that dominate the book of Revelation? One we maybe expect, but let me begin by saying, the cross of Jesus is the central event in this book.

That's maybe not what we expect. But we are presented time and time and time again with the Lamb who was slain.

[8 : 24] And we're being invited to think about Jesus and his sacrifice and his victory over sin and death at the cross, so that we would understand as readers that his victory is secure.

All the judgment scenes that come, all the battle scenes that we read of, they never put the victory of Jesus in doubt for a moment. Because there at the cross, the devil and the forces of evil and darkness have been decisively defeated.

So the cross of Jesus is central to the book of Revelation. It's a helpful key to unlock what's going on. The other key event, perhaps more obvious, is the return of Jesus.

They're being told to get ready for the return of Jesus, that point at which his victory is forever secured.

When that last resistance against his will is finally ended. When the end of evil comes and there is the renewal of all things.

[9 : 39] Theologians from previous times have drawn a helpful image from World War II. If you know that the timeline of World War II, the D-Day landings were the decisive moment in the war, the decisive turning point where victory for the allies from that point onwards was never in doubt.

D-Day is crucial to World War II. But we also know that the axis of evil continued to fight, continued to rage until victory in Europe Day.

Revelation says the church lives between the time of the cross, D-Day, decisive victory, and the second coming, V-E-Day, when victory is finally secured.

And in between those times, there is suffering and there is opposition, but there is the security of that final victory.

So the vision of John stands as comfort for a suffering church, for the church of his day, for a church in Ephesus, for the church in all times, for the church in Edinburgh. It is saying to us, keep going in your faith because your God reigns.

[11 : 03] Persevere in following him because your future and your eternity are secure through Jesus. There is one Lord and his name is Jesus, not Caesar.

So there is encouragement and there is hope and there is comfort. But Revelation is also a prophecy. Did you see that in verse 3? Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy. So Jesus is going to come back. That certain Jesus will return as judge. And so we need to be ready for that day.

The return of Jesus will mean condemnation for some and salvation for others, depending on how we have responded to Jesus in this life. Is our faith in him to forgive our sins and to bring us to God. So Revelation reminds us with urgency, be ready for the return of the king. There was a lecturer in the theology college up in the Highlands, Noel Jew, who talked about history as the battle for

worship.

[12:15] And when you read the imagery of Revelation, you see there is Jesus, the lamb, and he deserves all worship. But then there is this beast who wants to claim our worship.

And so we are being called to think really carefully, who or what do I worship in my life really and truly?

The function of the hymns. So we're going to focus on the hymns, the songs of Revelation. Why are they there?

What function do they have? Two main ideas that will be helpful for us as we work our way in coming weeks. First, the hymns serve as a gospel commentary on the events.

Lots of action, judgment scenes. The lens that the hymns give to us is that we see all the events happening, knowing that our sovereign God is in control.

[13:17] And the hymns keep reminding us of the victory and the reign of Jesus Christ. That's how we are invited to view the whole of Revelation. But the hymns also encourage us here on earth to pattern our worship on the worship of heaven.

We are invited to see what are these new songs that we get to sing as the people of God joining in the worship of heaven.

The church sings. Not just the church that sings, armies sing. Again, this week I found myself looking at a collection, a compilation of some of the most popular songs that our British troops sang in World War II.

It's really interesting to see the kind of themes of those songs. They sang for different reasons. They sang for a sense of camaraderie and morale.

They sang in foreign countries as reminders of home. Think about the White Cliffs of Dover as a popular example. And they sang songs to give them confidence.

[14:25] They were singing, anticipating victory in battles about to begin. I want to suggest as we come to the hymns of Revelation, here are the songs for our spiritual battle.

Here are songs to keep us united in persevering faith. Here are songs that change our perspective to remind us where our true home is.

We are currently exiles. Our true home is with God and with Jesus our Savior. And these songs celebrate the certain victory of the Lamb who was slain, who is also the Lion who rules in majesty. Now we're getting towards our text. Turn with me now to chapter 4. Worship in God's throne room is what we are drawn to in chapter 4 and chapter 5.

This is a crucial vision. So it falls in between. So it comes after these seven letters from Jesus through John to persecuted, suffering churches.

[15:41] And so you get these letters and then this vision of the glory of God to say to them, keep following this Lord, keep following this King, not the pretender Caesar.

But then chapters 4 and 5, they come before 6 to 18, which is a really lengthy series of judgment cycles. And we are being reminded, this is the God who is in control of history.

This is the one who is working out His purposes in time and history. This is the God who will judge evil to save His people, to establish the new heaven and the earth, to give us that world that we all want by the time we get to Revelation 21.

A world without pain and suffering and tears. A world without death. A world of perfect joy and love and peace. A world where heaven and earth are united, where we get to worship our great God and King.

So 4 and 5, they occupy a really vital place in the book. Again, if we continue with the battle imagery, and Revelation is full of battle imagery, spiritual battle, battle between good and evil is all there in Revelation.

[17:00] To continue that theme, God's throne room is, as it were, the command center. It's the control room of supreme headquarters.

This is where the victory of Christ is planned out. This is where the victory of Christ is also celebrated by those who are around the throne.

And so we are being reminded that this victory, we can be brought into this great victory if we are joining in the worship of heaven. If our great desire is for Jesus our Savior, if God is our Lord and King, then this victory and this worship is ours as the people of God.

There's a wonderful picture of worship here in chapter 4. We are presented in visual ways with the glory of God. So in verse 3, we see His shining, sparkling glory.

We see His powerful glory. In verse 5, thundering lightning like on Mount Sinai, where God met with His people in the book of the Exodus.

[18:12] And we're also being presented with figures around the throne and worship around the throne. And this worship that builds up, it begins in verses 6 and 8 with these four living creatures.

These images are drawn from the Old Testament, a way to represent every sort of living thing. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

So the creatures around the throne, they begin to worship. But then as they worship, they're joined by the 24 elders in verse 10.

Who are these 24 elders? Who do they represent? Well, most likely, drawing from Revelation 21, that represents the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles.

In other words, here is a way to represent the people of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament age, united together around the throne, worshipping God and Jesus, the Lamb, who is the Savior.

[19:19] Earth and heaven combining in worship and praise. A few weeks ago, we were in Romans chapter 8. We were thinking about the earth and the people of God together, groaning in anticipation.

When will the renewal of all things come? Well, here, the picture is different. Here is the earth and the people of God, worshipping with joy in the certainty of what's to come. There are two things that are real for us in the present as we think about Revelation, and they're both in the book.

We are a people who will both suffer and we are a people who should sing. Yes, there will be opposition.

Yes, there is the normal suffering of life. Yes, there are trials and we are pushed to the margin, but we sing and we sing with joy when we see the King in His glory, when He fills our gaze.

And one of the wonderful things about the book of Revelation is it helps us to persevere in our worship. I read just this morning from Tim Kesey.

[20:35] I've spoken about him a few times. He's a Christian who's also a travel journalist who goes to places where it's hard to be a Christian. He was talking about a visit he made to Pakistan in 2016.

He was in a community where 300 Christians had been attacked, where churches had been burned, where houses had been looted or destroyed.

And he spoke of one brother in Christ coming with his Bible to the very ashes of the church and telling this man, Tim Kesey, of words of promise that kept him going as the church suffered.

This is what he read. He read, Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life. Where's that from?

It's from Revelation. The book of Revelation gives solid hope to suffering Christians. It tells us to keep going.

[21:41] It encourages us to join in the day and night singing of heaven to the eternal God who deserves eternal praise.

So today is a good day for us to stop and reflect. Is this the God who I worship? Is this the one who I am trusting in, both in my life and with my death?

Do I join my heart and my voice to worship God, to worship Jesus, his son, as Lord over all? Very, very briefly, let's identify some of the notes of praise that these hymns give as we sing to our glorious God.

Verse 8 and verse 11. First thing to see, our God is holy. See there in verse 8, day and night, the four living creatures never stop saying, holy, holy, holy.

Just like Isaiah's vision of God and the angel singing, holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. That repetition there is for emphasis.

[23:01] Our God represents ultimate holiness. He is the one who is set apart. He is the one who is wholly other. He is the only one who is sinless and perfect.

He stands in a moral category, all of his own. And as such, he stands over and is able and qualified to judge and to save.

Think about that message for the people in Ephesus, the Christians in Ephesus in all their uncertainty, with the rise of Caesar, with the rise of hostility.

Think about our own situation. Politically, who knows what the future holds? In society, who knows where we're heading?

God does. In the face of our personal suffering, what is this hymn saying to us? This is our God and he is trustworthy.

[24 : 03] This is the God who is on the throne. He is greater than any Caesar. He's greater than any force. He is truly good and he is our God.

Our God is holy and we praise him as such. Our God is all-powerful. Again, verse 8, he is the Lord God Almighty.

Similar to Isaiah 6. Then he was the Lord of hosts, the commander-in-chief of heaven's armies. And here he is the Lord God Almighty, the one who has no rival, the one whose rule and power is absolute.

It's significant to think that praise towards God is also a word against God's rivals. To recognize God is all-powerful is to begin to realize that those Caesars, those things that claim a hold on us, they lack true power compared to our God.

Those idols in our lives that claim that they can give us happiness and security and identity, that job, that relationship, that money in the bank, we need to see that though they are good, they are not God.

[25 : 26] They are created. They are not our creator. They are small and they are finite. Our God, the one who we are to worship, is powerful and he is loving and he is the Lord God Almighty.

And our God is also eternal. Again, the end of verse 8, that hymn, he is the one who was and is and is to come.

When God revealed his name to Moses in Exodus chapter 3, he said, I am who I am.

He is eternal. He is unchangeable. Here, the emphasis is on this God who knows and controls past and present and future. In the middle of what looks like chaos to us, what might have looked like chaos to the church in Ephesus and other suffering churches, history is running to God's timetable. Again, the focus of Revelation is on the God who is in control of history and the God who will bring history to an end and establish the kingdom of Christ.

[26 : 40] And when you read the book of Revelation, the emphasis is not when is that going to happen, but how is that going to happen? One of the problems that you'll find if you sort of go on the internet and you look at what people say about Revelation, there's a lot of interest on when will these things happen.

So lots of people will study all the numbers and will try and figure out, okay, well, I think this event has maybe happened and this one's still to come and Jesus is going to come back on this date and that's never how Revelation was supposed to be read.

The focus is on how will this certain reality take place? And the answer is through the events of the gospel. It's through the victory of Jesus at the cross and the resurrection.

It's through his victorious return. That's how history will come to an end and his reign will begin. And at all points, the church is being called to worship, recognizing the future is in God's hands.

So we can trust. The victory of Christ is certain. So if our faith is in him, we can rest. And if it's not, then we're invited to repent, to turn from sin and to turn to God so we'd be ready for his certain return.

[27 : 59] So that's the hymn of the four living creatures, but then they are joined by the 24 elders and they sing a different song.

They say, you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power. So they declare, our Lord is worthy of praise. And here's why. For you created all things, and by your will, they were created and have their being.

Now one thing that's not immediately apparent to us, but would have been apparent to the folks in Ephesus back in 95 AD, is that this is a political hymn.

By that I mean, Caesar Domitian, as he sat on his throne, as he was being attended by the people of the royal court, he would be hearing phrases like, Caesar is worthy.

Caesar is Lord and God. Caesar has glory and honor and power. To live in the Roman Empire was to have that song dominate your life.

[29 : 09] But for the church, it was different. Here's a new song for the church. Here is a political song. Caesar's not Lord, Jesus is. God alone deserves loyalty and obedience and worship.

All creation exists by God's will. Not Caesar's. All of creation is kept going by God's kindness. Not a political ruler's.

In this battle for worship, therefore, when they were being pulled and we are being pulled and we are squeezed into the world's mold, we are being reminded there's only one right choice. Because our God is great and he is glorious. Can I suggest this is a song for our Sundays, but it's also a song for our Monday mornings too.

To the believers in Ephesus as they stepped out their front door, those statues to Caesar, they were not ultimate truth. As they endured another day of economic and social struggle, that was just temporary for them.

[30 : 18] They were being reminded you're on the winning side. Jesus is Lord. For us in Edinburgh, your colleagues may not get why you go to church at the weekend, why you want to give time to serve.

You may find yourself mocked in conversation or kept out of certain conversations because of your faith. You may be misunderstood as you try to represent God in the world that he has made.

And life may feel like a struggle, but also for us, we need to remember the gospel. To lay hold on this fact that the cross, the great victory has already been won.

That eternal hope for the people of God has most certainly been secured. Our God is on the throne and he is for us and our God is holy and he is powerful and he is eternal and he is our creator king and he is in Jesus our savior.

So may those notes, those notes of praise help you sing even if you suffer, even if you are opposed, even if you feel small and weak in your faith.