

Look Who Is On The Throne

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[0 : 00] It happened in June of 1984 while on a flight to Seoul, South Korea. I was traveling to that great city to attend an international prayer assembly sponsored by the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization.

The very first worldwide gathering called for the simple purpose of praying for the world. Participating in that event would change the direction of my life and ministry, leading to the Lord one year later calling me and Sharon and our family to Manila, the Philippines, where we would then serve for four years.

It happened about halfway across the Pacific Ocean just after passing the international dateline. The cabin lights were turned off and most of the passengers were asleep.

I was reading for the third or fourth time that night the portion of the revelation of Jesus Christ that we're going to read in a few moments, chapters four and five.

I was being drawn into and deeply moved by the words and imagery which the Apostle John, one of Jesus' beloved followers, uses in the text.

[1 : 23] At one point in the reading, I do not remember exactly when it was, I was overcome with a strong desire to worship.

My mind and heart were so on fire, I just had to sing and sing and sing. And for just a moment, a very brief moment, it seemed, it seemed as if the cabin filled with light, a bright, radiant light. And I felt that I should wake up the other passengers and say, we have to have a worship service. In that moment, something happened in my soul that radically changed the way I would see the world.

A number of years later, as I began to more seriously study the last book of the Bible, I came to understand that that is the reason this book was crafted, to change the way we see the world. New Testament scholar Richard Baucom of Scotland reminds us that the first readers of this book were constantly confronted with powerful images of the Roman vision of the world.

[2 : 49] Everything around them impressed on them, visual impressions of Roman military power and the splendor of pagan religion. In this context, writes Baucom, the revelation of Jesus Christ provides a set of Christian prophetic counter images which impress on the reader a different vision of the world, affecting a kind of purging of the imagination and refurbishing it with alternative visions of what the world is and will be.

It began to happen to me in that 747, some 30,000 feet above the surface of the Pacific Ocean. Lord Jesus, in your mercy, will you please do it for us today as we now read what you revealed to your beloved disciple John on the prison island of Patmos.

Amen. The revelation of Jesus Christ, chapters 4 and 5. We have to read them together because they just belong together.

And if you're able, would you please stand for the reading of God's word. After these things, that is, after Jesus dictated the seven messages to the seven churches, after these things, I looked and behold, a door standing open in heaven.

[4 : 31] And the first voice, which I had heard like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me said, come up here and I will show you what must take place after these things.

Immediately, I was in the spirit and behold, a throne was standing in heaven and one sitting on the throne. He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance.

And there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. And around the throne were 24 thrones. And upon the thrones, I saw 24 elders sitting, clothed in white garments and golden crowns on their heads.

And from the throne proceed flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God.

And before the throne, there was, as it were, a sea of glass like crystal. And in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind.

[5 : 31] And the first creature was like a lion. The second creature was like a calf. The third creature had the face like that of a man. And the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, were full of eyes around and within.

And day and night, they do not cease to say, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and who is to come. When the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne, to him who lives forever and ever, the 24 elders will fall down before him who sits on the throne and will worship him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Worthy are you, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and because of your will, they exist and were created.

And I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a book, a scroll, written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals.

And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book and break its seals? And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the book or look into it.

And I began to weep greatly because no one was found worthy to open the book and to look into it. One of the elders said to me, Stop weeping. Behold, the lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.

[7 : 02] And I saw between the throne with the four living creatures and the elders a lamb standing as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the world.

And he came and he took it out of the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken the book, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the lamb, having each one a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints, and they sang a new song saying, Worthy are you to take the book and to break its seals, for you were slain and purchased for God with your blood, men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

And you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth. And I looked and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders.

And the number of them was myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

And every created thing, which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea and all things in them, I heard them say to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.

[8 : 24] And the four living creatures kept saying, Amen. And the elders fell down and worshiped. This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Or maybe we should get down on our knees. Yes. More than any other section of the last book of the Bible, these two chapters put everything into perspective for me.

Indeed, more than any other section of the whole Bible, these two chapters help me keep my balance in the midst of all that is going on in the world today.

Apocalyptic literature does that. More than any other literature, apocalyptic literature puts things into perspective, into cosmic perspective.

It puts life on earth into cosmic perspective in two ways. First, it sets the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future.

[9 : 31] Jesus is coming and he's bringing with him a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation. He's bringing with him a city. It's a city full of energy and creativity.

It's a city shot through with beauty and glory. It's a city free of injustice and disease and pain and death. It's a city wherein we experience intimacy with the living God in ways we never thought were possible.

Set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. If you can just see for a moment, you see that on the horizon is this coming Jesus with a new creation.

But second, and primarily, apocalyptic literature gives us perspective because it sets the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

Things are not only as they seem. I'm going to invite you to say that with me. Things are not only as they seem.

[10:32] Once more, please. Things are not only as they seem. More is going on around us than we can figure out on our own, no matter how smart we are. More is going on around us than we can deduce with our brains or intuit with our hearts or dream with our imagination.

And it is the purpose of apocalyptic literature to open up that more for us. Now, what the apostle John discovers and what we discover, or as I probably should put it, what is disclosed to John and what is disclosed to us is that worship of the living God is taking place all around us all the time. center of unbroken praise, as the great hymn puts it. Joyful, joyful, we adore the center of unbroken praise. Worship of the living God is taking place all around us all the time, which has very practical implications for us who live in this visible, tangible form of existence.

It means that worship does not only happen on the Lord's day. And it means that worship does not begin with us and it does not end with us. Whenever we stop and worship, whether in a sanctuary like this or on an airplane, we enter into a service already in progress, always already in progress. John was on the prison island of Patmos. Why? Because he would not join in the worship of Caesar. He would not join in the worship of Caesar, which was the glue that held the Roman empire together.

[12:17] Respect Caesar. Yes, or maybe pay taxes to Caesar. Reluctantly. Pray for Caesar. Certainly. But worship Caesar as Lord and God, as Domini at Deus.

No. John was not about to deny everything he knew about God in Jesus Christ in order to join the worship of a mere mortal who had usurped the place which only the living God can occupy.

He is not about to enter into the worship of the nation state. And so he's sent to Patmos as a political troublemaker and as an atheist. On the Lord's day, he's worshiping in the spirit.

He's worshiping the triune God of grace in the power of the spirit. And it appears, if you were looking at it, and it would appear that he's worshiping all alone.

He's all alone on that miserable rock pile. But he soon discovers that he's not alone at all. He discovers that somehow on that prison island, he has entered into worship that has been going on a long time.

[13:29] Worship already in progress. Always already in progress. Through Revelation 4 and 5, the present moment is being set in light of the unseen realities of the present.

Worship is taking place quite apart from us. Thank you. The question is, will we enter in?

Now, here's the plan for today. Let's simply walk through this scene, these two chapters, making some observations as we go. And then let's come back and suggest some implications for us at this moment in history.

Okay, that's the plan. We're going to walk through the scene again and then draw some implications. Here's the walkthrough. Ready? I looked, says John, and behold.

Behold is a command. Look. I looked and look. It's the second most frequent command of the apocalypse of Jesus Christ. The first most frequent is, do not be afraid.

[14:36] We obey the command, do not be afraid, by obeying the command, look. Look. The idea being, turn and look. Turn away from everything you've been looking at and look.

A door into heaven. Open. A door into heaven.

Open. The implication being, it'll never be closed again. Because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, the door is open and we are invited to go through it into heaven.

For the Bible, heaven is not a faraway place. Heaven is another realm of existence very close at hand. Very, very close.

All around us, intersecting our lives all the time. ordinarily, not visible, not audible, not touchable, but very close at hand. And the door into that other dimension of reality is open.

[15:57] So John hears a voice saying, come up here. It's the voice he heard at the beginning of his experience on the island of Patmos. It's the voice of Jesus. Come up here.

And because John has written what he experienced for us, we know the voice is also speaking to us. Come up here. The door is open.

Come farther up and further in. And John says, he was immediately in the spirit as he had been earlier in the day. And another, behold, another, look, a throne. Look, there is, there is a headquarters to the universe. a throne. Now, the fact of the matter is, John is not the first person to be given an apocalypse of this throne. Hundreds of years before, it happened to the prophet Ezekiel and to the prophet Daniel. It also happened to the prophet Micaiah. In an encounter with one of Israel's kings, Micaiah says, I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the hosts of heaven standing by him. [17:07] It happened to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 6, a text that some of you may know, in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne. And then goes on to speak in of these creatures who are singing holy, holy, holy.

Look, a throne with someone sitting on it. And we have every good reason to believe he's not going to fall off. King Uzziah dies.

The emperors Nero and Domitian strut across the stage in pompous arrogance and die. But the great emperor does not die.

He remains seated on the throne. Now, since the time when the prophets were given this apocalypse of the throne, the world has gone through thousands of enthronings and dethronings. China has gone through at least ten dynasty changes. So, Japan and India even more. Hundreds of powerful, aggressive, threatening, seemingly invincible empires have come and gone.

[18:14] Samaria, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Ottoman Empire, the Inca, and the Aztecs. Since the time people began to worship on this corner in this city, history has witnessed the dethroning of the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Austro-Hungarian, and the Dutch empires.

Gone are the German Reichs of Kaiser Wilhelm and Adolf Hitler, the Italian reign of Benito Mussolini, the Japanese reign of Emperor Hirohito, the reign of Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. We have seen the rise and fall of Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, Nikita Khrushchev, Mao Tse-Sung, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, Ho Chi Minh. We've witnessed the dismantling of the once powerful Soviet Union. We've witnessed the collapse of the apartheid reign in South Africa. Hong Kong is now part of the People's Republic of China, further diminishing the mighty British Empire. Gone are Sodom Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

The United States is experiencing a crisis in leadership, symptomatic of profound instability. Do not be afraid. Look, a throne with someone sitting on it, immovable, sitting on that throne.

[19:34] And he who was sitting, says John, was like a jasper stone in Sardius in appearance. And later, from the throne proceeded flashes of lightning. But of course, the living God is pure light.

When Ezekiel saw the throne, he said it was like shining metal. When Daniel saw the throne, he said it was like a flaming fire. Like, like, like, suggesting that there simply is no way to describe the quality and quantity of light that is oozing from and surrounding the one who sits on the throne. Psalm 104, you clothe yourself with light as with a garment. Wherever and whenever the living God chooses to make himself known, there is light, lots of light.

Charles Wesley then sings in his hymn, which is his personal testimony, Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night.

Thine eye diffused a quickening ray. I woke the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth and followed thee.

[20:44] So John also sees seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which he learns are the seven spirits of God. Seven is the number of completeness. Seven spirits of God is a way of saying the Holy Spirit in his completeness.

the fire of God in his completeness, the purity of God in his completeness, very, very close at hand and spilling through that open door around and through and in the disciples of the true emperor. And John sees a rainbow around the throne. Of course, the rainbow is the sign of God's just mercy and merciful justice, the sign that the one who sits on the throne deals with human sin as it deserves.

There is a flood, but then deals with humanity as we do not deserve. Mercy, he starts over. And we see before the throne a sea of glass like crystal.

I take this image of the sea to refer to the powers of chaos, not to a literal body of water. The sea is this image of the power of chaos always seeking to suck the cosmos into nothingness before the throne like crystal, calm and subdued, shining with the beauty and orderliness of the creator.

[22 : 03] This is why when in those moments you and I cry out in the midst of chaos and pray in the midst of chaos, we experience this unexplainable peace.

In the presence of the one who sits on the throne, chaos is subdued. And John sees 24 other thrones. With 24 elders sitting on them, clothed in white garments and golden crowns on their head. Assembled in a semicircle as the elders were in the Jewish Sanhedrin. Now, does this mean these thrones are now in rival of the great throne? No. It means that God has chosen to set up thrones around his thrones and to invite others in on his governing of the world.

24 thrones. That's 12 plus 12. 12 representing the people of God before Jesus came. 12 representing the people of God after Jesus came. God brings his people around him to join him in running the world.

And John says, I saw four living creatures around and very close in on the throne. They're very weird creatures. I could feel it as I was reading it. I think they represent the whole of creation like a lion, like a calf, like a man, like an eagle.

[23 : 14] Creation gathered around the throne in ceaseless praise. This is a major theme of the whole Bible. Creation gets it.

Creation knows that there is a creator. Humanity might not know there's a creator, but creation does. Creation knows this creator is all praiseworthy.

That's why when Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and is told to quiet those who are shouting to him, what does he say? If I, they be quiet, the rocks will cry out.

Creation gets it. You see, creation doesn't live under this illusion that casts its spell over our culture. Creation doesn't live with the illusion that there's no creator. Creation knows the truth and creation worships.

Night and day, John says, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come over and over again, never tiring of the repetition, holy, holy, holy.

[24 : 16] And then John sees that the 24 elders are inspired by creation singing. The redeemed people of God hear the praise of creation and join in. John says, the elders take off their crowns and cast them before the throne saying, worthy are you, our Lord and God, Domini et Deus.

John is stealing the thunder from Caesar. Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things and by your will they exist.

When the door into heaven is opened, we rediscover the truth. The universe is not an accident. We are not an accident.

The universe and we in it are created. The universe has meaning. We have meaning. We are alive in this very moment because the one who sits on the throne wills us to be alive.

And then we come to the most dramatic moment of all. Not only for these two chapters, Revelation 4 and 5, but for the whole of the apocalypse of Jesus Christ.

[25 : 24] and there's no way that I can possibly exaggerate the significance of this moment. John sees a scroll in the right hand of the one who sits on the throne. There's writing inside and outside.

It's sealed up with seven seals. It's the scroll of history. It contains the plan and course of history. Wouldn't you like to look into that scroll?

John sees an angel asking with a loud voice, who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals? Who indeed? Who has the wisdom to understand the flow of history?

Who has the ability to guide history? No one, John discovers. Revelation 5, 3, no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth.

No one was able to open the scroll. And he began to weep. I began to weep greatly, he says.

[26 : 23] Then comes the moment. John says that one of the 24 elders says to him, Stop weeping. Behold, look, there's that command again. Look, the lion of the tribe of Judah, of the root of David, he has overcome and he can open the scroll and break its seals.

The lion of Judah, the root of David, are messianic titles. The lion has come. The lion has overcome. The lion can open the scroll. Yay!

And then comes the moment. John says he saw a gigantic, mighty lion.

Right? Rippling with muscles, armed to the teeth, roaring with a roar that levels everything in front of it.

Right? He saw ferocious lion. The lion has overcome. Yay! And I saw a lion. No. No.

[27 : 26] That's not what happened at all. Revelation 5, 6. And I saw. Ready? And I saw between the throne. That's not a good way to translate that. It should be in the middle of. In the middle of the

throne.

In the center of the throne. Ready? Ready? I saw in the middle of the throne, which means in the middle of the Almighty who sits on the throne. I saw in the middle of the throne. Ready? A lion.

No. A lamb. I saw a lamb as if slain. I saw a lamb as if slain with seven horns.

Horns are the symbol of strength. Seven, the number of completion. In the weakness of being slain, he is immensely strong. Seven eyes. Eyes are the symbol of wisdom.

Seven, the number of completion. In the foolishness of being slain, he's immensely wise. A lamb. In the Greek New Testament, there are two words translated lamb.

[28 : 22] One of them is omnos. It means adult sheep. This is the word John the Baptist used when he saw Jesus of Nazareth coming to him down the road and said, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The other word is arnion. A-R-N-I-O-N. It means young sheep. Little sheep. Little lamb.

Do not be afraid. Look, the lion has overcome and I turned and I saw a lamb. A little lamb.

Mary's little lamb. Whose utter weakness slain on the cross turns out to be immense power and immense wisdom.

The lion does not overcome as a lion. No one ever overcomes as a lion.

[29 : 22] The lion overcomes by being a lamb and giving his life for the life of the world. John then hears the whole of creation breaking out in joyful celebration.

The elders sing a new song. The living creatures sing a new song. And everything that is in creation sings a new song and then the elders fall down in adoration. Okay.

Let us now draw out just three implications for us from this cosmic scene. first it is safe it is safe to go through the open door and approach the throne of the universe.

It is safe in the middle in the center of the one who sits on the throne is the lamb the perfect sufficient sacrifice for sin.

It matters not how badly you or I have sinned. Well yeah it does matter because it ruins our life and we live with this unbearable weight of guilt and shame.

[30 : 39] But in approaching that throne it does not matter how badly we have sinned. It's safe to approach the throne as if slain for the sin of the world as if slain a lamb in the very center in the very heart of the one to whom we are accountable.

Before the throne of God above I have a strong and perfect plea a great high priest whose name is love whoever lives and pleads for me my name is written in his hands my name is written in his heart I know that while in heaven he stands no tongue can bid me to depart no tongue can bid me depart behold him there the risen lamb my perfect spotless righteousness the great unchangeable I am the king of glory and of grace one with himself I cannot die my soul is purchased by his blood my life is hid with Christ on high my life is hid with Christ on high brothers and sisters it is safe to go through the open door and approach the throne of the universe I heard a couple amens I could use a few more very good second implication secret we now know the secret we now know the secret of history sacrificial love

God wins through sacrificial love Jesus wins through sacrificial love in the middle in the center sacrificial love self-giving love self-emptying love lions do not win as lions in their arrogance and ferociousness and self-centeredness and greed they only dig themselves deeper into the grip of sin Benito Mussolini is said to have quoted the Roman proverb it is better to live one day as a lion than a thousand days as a lamb that's why Mussolini's days on the stage of history are so short he didn't get it and those who quote him don't get it either it is as a lamb that the lion wins seven horns immensely immensely strong seven eyes immensely wise and in his strength and wisdom giving himself over to the powers of sin and death and evil on the cross that's foolishness that's weakness only if you don't understand the secret because through that apparent weakness and foolishness he wins on the cross he wins this is what the gospel writers want us to know

Matthew in particular Matthew tells us that as Jesus dies on the cross as he is slain in the moment he is slain the curtain in the temple is torn in two from back to bottom rocks begin to split creation is crying out and graves open what as Jesus dies in the moment he is slain the graves open in the moment he dies the graves open yes because in the moment he dies he won and death's captives had to set them free this is what C.S. Lewis was trying to get us to see in the chronicles of Narnia many of you have read Narnia Aslan the lion does not win by being a lion that's the secret of the chronicles of Narnia Aslan the lion wins by being an Arnion a lamb Aslan breaks the spell of the

white witch by laying helpless on the stone table and lets evil do to him what evil has always wanted to do to humanity and in the moment he dies the deeper magic as Aslan puts it kicks in and death begins to work backwards sacrificial love as weak and unimpressive and foolishness as it appears overcomes nothing else overcomes that's the secret of history from the beginning to the end sacrificial love alone wins amen and third major implication we now discover our role in the midst of it all ready it's stunning it blows my mind our role in the midst of it all we now reign with the reigning lamb what we thank you now reign with the reigning lamb listen to the new song revelation 5:10 and you the lamb have made them those purchased by the blood of the lamb have made them a kingdom and priest to our god and they will reign on the earth wow now not in some distant future now the lamb is reigning now and those who belong to the lamb now reign with him that's why the 24 other thrones are in the picture we have been brought in on the lamb's governing of the world I mean talk about an apocalypse talk about setting the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present we now reign with the reigning lamb question is how and the answer is secret of history the same way he does in sacrificial love sacrificial love moves history you know that the credit usually goes to those who exercise great power but they are not the movers and shakers of history those who move history are like are those who like the lamb who alone can open the scroll give themselves away in sacrificial love you know that and who pray John sees the elders fall down before the lamb and he sees that they have in their hands golden bowls full of incense which he learns are the prayers of the saints we reign with the reigning lamb when we join him in his praying in his intercession from the throne the true movers and shakers of history are those who day in and day out pray the way the lamb taught us to pray our father who art in heaven [37:16] Abba on the throne cause your name to be hallowed on earth as it is in heaven cause your kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven cause your good pleasure to be done on earth as it is in heaven that's how you move history thus all the hymns and songs and choruses in this service of worship always in progress worthy are you because you created all things worthy are you because you were slain worthy worthy the hymns and songs are making a very provocative political statement I've often wondered how did John get this document out of prison without getting into more trouble listen worthy are you to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing why does he put it that way those are the very words that were said to the emperor Caesar as he entered the Roman senate in the city of Rome as the emperor came in all people were to rise and they were to sing to him worthy are you to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing really

Caesar worthy of such acclamation John knows that's not true there's only one who's worthy of such acclamation the one who sits on the throne and the lamb who sits in the middle of the one who's on the throne you are worthy things are not only as they seem whenever we enter into a time of worship in this place in your office at home or on an airplane we are entering a service already in progress always already in progress and the question to ask after worship is not what did I get out of it I'm not the issue asking the question what did I get out of it is a sign of falling into the narcissism of our age we are not the issue the question to ask after worship is did I enter in did I join the living creatures and the elders and worship did I find myself wanting to fall in adoration before the lamb set things set the present in light of the unseen realities of the future and set the present in light of the unseen realities of the present the lamb not a lion is on the throne nail print hands now hold the reins of the universe and all of creation knows it and all of creation cries out worthy amen amen