

The Occupied Throne

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[0 : 00] Our first reading this morning will be taken from the book of Isaiah, chapter 6, verses 1 to 7, and that can be found on page 689 on the Bibles on your chairs.

That's Isaiah, chapter 6, verses 1 to 7, on page 689. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim, each had six wings. With two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said, Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.

[1 : 23] And he touched my mouth and said, Behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.

The reading is from Revelation chapter 4, verses 1 to 11, on page 1, 2, 3, 8.

Page 1, 2, 3, 8. 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. At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.

And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments with gold crowns on their heads.

[2 : 30] From the throne came flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which the seven spirits of God.

And before the throne there was, as it were, a sea of glass like crystal. And round the throne on each side of the throne are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind.

The first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox. The third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight.

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within. And day and night they never cease to say, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who's seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who's seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever.

[3 : 39] They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power. For you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

Well, please have that passage open in front of you. It would be great if you could keep that before you. If you've ever seen the classic 1970s movie, Jaws, yes it was that long ago, directed by Steven Spielberg, then perhaps you can imagine this scene.

While walking along a beach somewhere one day, you see a young woman swimming not very far from the shore. Suddenly, and to your utter shock and horror, you also see a great white shark approaching her.

A certain theme music might come to mind at that point. In a blind panic, you begin shouting for help, but no one pays you any attention. In fact, everyone around you seems worryingly unconcerned.

You rush around the corner to try and get some help, but that's when you spot it. A big black chair with one word written on the back of it in big bold capital letters.

[5 : 02] Director. There's a man sitting in that chair with a big cigar and a loud voice shouting instructions into a megaphone.

You breathe a huge sigh of relief. You've stumbled across a film set. And the director of that film, despite signs to the contrary, actually does have everything under his control.

That, I believe, is the point of Revelation chapters 4 and 5. John, the writer, wanted the Christians he was writing to in the first century to breathe, as it were, a huge sigh of relief.

As he helped them to understand that despite appearances to the contrary, which incidentally for many of them would have included imprisonment, physical persecution, and even death because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Despite all this, writes John, God was and is still the one directing and controlling the affairs of this world and indeed their individual lives.

[6 : 16] The book of Revelation splits, broadly speaking, into two halves. In chapters 1 to 11, we have depicted the terrible conflict on earth between the church and the rest of sinful, God-hating humanity.

In the first century, this was embodied in the hostility of the Roman Empire. And especially as the emperors themselves claimed divine status for themselves and so persecuted Christians for insisting that Jesus and not Caesar was indeed the Lord.

In the 20th and more recently in the 21st century, such religious persecution perhaps has been exemplified by communism and Islam, respectively. But the second half of the book of Revelation, chapters 12 to 22 is here in part at least, to help us to see that these historical expressions of hostility towards Christianity from 1st to 21st centuries is in reality the physical manifestation of an age-long conflict in the spiritual world between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. According to chapter 1, verse 9 of the book of Revelation, John is on an island off the coast of Turkey called Patmos when he receives his first vision.

The glorified God-man later, Jesus Christ, invites him up into the spiritual realm as a doorway stands open for him to enter through.

[7 : 55] In chapter 1, verse 10 and chapter 4, verse 2, we are told that John is in the spirit. It's difficult to know exactly what this means except that on both occasions it relates to John seeing spiritual realities which otherwise would remain veiled to human eyes like you and me.

I think it may simply be John's way of telling us that what he saw was not simply his own imagination. He hadn't eaten some dodgy Patmos mushrooms. John wasn't high on cannabis. No, rather what he was seeing had been given to him by the spirit of the living God. Whatever the case, what follows is John trying to describe the indescribable.

The point of which seems to be this. Hold on to your faith. God is still on his throne. That's the one thing, the one point I want you to take away from this morning.

No matter what your hardships or sufferings, no matter what your concerns or anxieties going forward, as you sit here this morning, the throne of this universe is occupied.

[9 : 16] So hold on to your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, no matter what. That is what John wanted the Christians facing persecution in the first century to grasp.

That simple fact. And to help them with this, John uses a powerfully vivid form of picture language. The book of Revelation is really a series of beautifully painted pictures using large, bold, potent, and often strange and exaggerated colors to present Christian truth or doctrine.

Think graphic novel if that helps you. So we've got to be careful to not get too bogged down in the details of any one picture, lest we fail to understand the spiritual truth it is there to teach us.

The first picture John was given was of a gloriously majestic, god-like man walking among seven golden lampstands.

In summary, this is Jesus walking in the midst of his church. The point being that Jesus knows his church.

[10 : 26] He is lord of his church and will be the judge of his church, as is evidenced by the seven letters he sends out to his church.

Chapter 1, verse 9, to the end of chapter 3 of the book. In John's second vision, in chapter 4, he sees a great throne with someone sitting on it.

Look at chapter 4, verse 1 with me. 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, from chapter 1, said, come up here and I will show you what must take place after this.

Verse 2, at once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven with one seated on the throne. The key word in this chapter, throne, is used 14 times in 11 verses.

A throne, of course, is a seat from which a king rules. And so four times in this passage, in verses 2 and 3, and verse 9 and 10, we are told that there is someone sitting on this throne.

[11 : 38] In other words, the throne is occupied because someone is ruling.

And this idea is key to our understanding of this chapter. But note, this chair belongs not to a Spielberg, a Tarantino, Scorsese, or a Nolan, but rather to the one directing the affairs of the kingdom of heaven, and indeed, our entire universe.

So in keeping with the second command, John does not attempt any description of this enthroned one. He does not describe him in human or earthly terms, yet clearly these two things, the throne and the one sitting on that throne, dominates this entire chapter.

Look at verse 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.

John merely describes his appearance, that is, his radiance or effulgence. John is simply comparing what he sees to other earthly things that you and I perhaps can relate to, so that we can get some kind of handle on what he is seeing.

[13 : 08] Clearly, he is trying to describe the one Daniel in the Old Testament described as the Ancient of Days. Isaiah described him as the Lord seated on his throne high and exalted.

Isaiah 6, we had read a few moments ago. This seated one's appearance is like Jasper, a very precious diamond-colored jewel radiating its crystal-like beauty.

But also, he has the appearance of ruby or carnelian, a fiery red stone. Some think the former represents his purity or holiness, while the latter his judgment, but we don't really know.

But what we do know is that both Jasper and Carnelian are very precious stones. And I think that's very likely John's point. What else could be used to describe the glorious presence of the Almighty God himself, apart from the most breathtakingly precious materials known to us?

His throne, furthermore, is surrounded or encircled by an emerald-like rainbow. Ezekiel, in his vision, also saw what looked like a rainbow surrounding the throne of God.

[14 : 26] And he tells us, such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory, the weightiness of the Lord. Ezekiel 1, verse 28.

Of course, the rainbow also reminds us of the Lord's covenant mercy over his creation after the flood that destroyed the ancient world of Noah's day. So as we read the book of Revelation, we should be reminded of other parts of the Bible, namely the Old Testament.

Indeed, it has been estimated that there are over 400 references or allusions to the Old Testament in the book of Revelation alone. For example, the lightning and the thunder in verse 5 of our passage should remind us of the Lord's presence on Mount Sinai during the giving of the law in the book of Exodus through Moses.

The sea of crystal-like glass in front of the throne in verse 6 of chapter 4 of Revelation should remind us of the setting for the covenant meal. Moses and the Israelite elders enjoyed in the presence of the Lord in Exodus chapter 24.

In Ezekiel's vision, a similar expanse is seen above the heads of the living creatures around the throne. Notice that verse 6 does not say that it was a sea of glass, but only that it was like crystal.

[15 : 57] Again, John is attempting to describe the indescribable. Or in the words of one writer, the finite language of this earthly sphere is incompetent to define and depict the infinite realities that John saw.

Human analogies are inadequate to describe the full wonder of the scene on which the apostle was privileged to gaze. They are but finite pointers to an infinite reality.

See, there are few scenes more tranquil and beautiful than a glass-like scene, untroubled by the winds of change and stretching into the distant horizon.

The sharp contrast between this scene and the disturbances on the earth that are about to be unfolded in chapter 6 with the breaking of the seals is very likely deliberate.

In other words, the Lord reigns supreme. Not indifferent, but untroubled. Above and beyond all the turmoil between good and evil being played out here on earth.

[17:19] Nothing on this earth takes him by surprise such that he's perturbed by it or falls outside of his sovereign control, sending him into a panic attack.

That may be our response to the world around us, but not his. Our God is not like the film director who must worry about going over budget or falling out with his lead actors or getting bogged down in post-production issues.

No, he reigns supreme above and beyond all that kind of nonsense. Now in verse 4, we see that in addition to all this, God's throne is surrounded by 24 lesser thrones.

Each one seating an elder dressed in white wearing a crown and whose attention appears to be directed towards the one sitting on the throne.

The Bible commentators are divided over exactly who these elders are or what they represent.

Some think they represent the people of God in both Old and New Testaments.

[18:31] 24 being the combination of the 12 patriarchs and the 12 apostles. And later, in chapter 21, the names of all these individuals are on the foundation and the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem, the heavenly city.

But others think they are simply another order of heavenly being as distinct from cherubim and seraphim. Now I need to take my own advice here and not get bogged down in the details.

I, we, must not miss the point which I think is this. Whoever these elders are, they must surely be highly esteemed to be sitting surrounding the throne of God himself.

Yet their focus is not on themselves, but on the one seated on the throne. The Bible poet elsewhere writes this, Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord?

A God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones and awesome above all who are around him. Some months ago, myself and some friends, they were actually the Grace Church Broccoli Church Council, attended a conference in central London at a church that many of you know, St. Helens.

[19:48] But it was difficult not to notice the many tall buildings towering above our conference venue of St. Helens. As of this year, there are 17 skyscrapers in London that reach a roof height of at least 150 metres.

That's 500 feet. Compared with 19 in Paris, 15 in Frankfurt, 11 in Warsaw and 5 in Madrid and Milan.

Imagine walking into one of the boardrooms in one of these tall buildings, perhaps the Gherkin or the Cheese Grater here in London. And you see one rather big chair at one end of one of those boardrooms, surrounded by 24 other lesser chairs.

You'd be inclined to think, wouldn't you, that the person who occupies the big chair must be a pretty important person, mustn't he? Or she. Or she. That seat normally belongs to the CEO or the MD of that company, doesn't it?

You know, the person responsible for directing the affairs of that business, whose annual bonus alone is well over 10 times the average UK salary. In other words, whoever these elders are, the point is their presence greatly enhances the stature and the status of the one sitting on that main throne.

[21:16] That, I think, is John's point. If this throne is surrounded by 24 great ones, how much greater then must be the one enthroned in their midst?

But there is more. Because they are not the only ones surrounding the throne of the Almighty. Look at verse 6. Around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind.

The first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. Verse 8.

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within. And day and night, they never cease to say, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

Now, if you compare these living creatures to those in Isaiah chapter 6, seen by the prophet Isaiah, and Ezekiel in chapter 1, seen by the prophet Ezekiel, they are either what Isaiah calls seraphim or what Ezekiel calls cherubim.

[22 : 37] In the words of world-famous evangelist Billy Graham, in a book that he wrote many years ago about angels, he writes, they are an order of angelic beings that are surrounded by much mystery in scripture.

Apparently, there is an ancient Jewish saying that goes like this, the mightiest among the birds is the eagle, the mightiest among the domestic animals is the bull, the mightiest among the wild beasts is the lion, and the mightiest among them all is man.

These four awesome and terrifying-looking living creatures surrounding God's throne, it would seem, symbolize the noblest, the strongest, the wisest, and the swiftest of all God's creatures created by him, the lion, the bull, us, and the eagle.

And it's difficult to pin down what we should call them because of the significant differences between what Isaiah saw and what Ezekiel saw when compared to what John sees here in Revelation 4.

But the key thing, I think, to understand these creatures is the fact that they are covered with eyes all over and even, John tells us, inside.

[23 : 58] They've got eyes inside. This, I think, is John's way of telling us that these creatures have great insight or extraordinary spiritual perception.

they see things or have insight that human beings like you and I, even with all our scientific and technological know-how, simply do not possess and cannot possess but for the grace of God.

To put it slightly differently, you and I could get very bogged down trying to work out exactly who the 24 elders are and exactly who these four living creatures are. But here's the only important point. Nudge the person next to you if they've been drifting off. Here we go. Who they are is not nearly so important as what they are doing.

Who they are is not nearly so important as what they are doing. As I read verses 8 to 11 again, ask yourself, what great insight do these extraordinary creatures possess?

[25 : 05] Verse 8, and the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within and day and night, they never cease to say, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come.

Verse 9, 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 24 elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever.

They cast their crowns before him, before the throne and 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 have been created.

The focus of both the living creatures and the 24 elders is upon the one seated on the throne. In this world, often great power is achieved through evil means and exercised all sorts of evil ends.

So in the first century when John wrote Revelation, Roman rule from the emperor down to one of his lowliest bureaucrats was tainted by corruption and self-interest.

[26 : 20] Here in the UK, people are increasingly cynical about the promises of all our political leaders because we sense self-interest if not out-and-out corruption.

Disillusionment with world leaders seems increasingly to be a global problem, doesn't it? Yet these living creatures who stand before this enthroned one with their great insight never stop declaring day and night his purity or holiness because they see and know it to be true.

They know and understand that at the heart of this universe is one who rules with uncompromising purity and goodness. The Lord God Almighty, the one seated on the throne of this universe.

And they know that he always was, always is, and always, always will be. Verse 8, and they give him glory, honor, and thanks because he sits on his throne ruling the universe forever and ever because he lives eternally to do just that.

Verse 9, and as these awesome living creatures do this, notice the response of the 24 elders. In verse 10, they fall down and worship him. Not the Roman emperor Domitian.

[27 : 46] He does not possess true power. He is not the one directing human affairs despite appearances to the contrary. No, true power belongs to the one true Lord and God who sits on the throne of the universe ruling it forever and ever.

So these great ones lay their crowns. Note, they lay their crowns before him in worship and adoration. Whoever they are, their rule or power is subject to his.

And what do they say to this enthroned one? Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power because you created all things and by your will they existed and were created.

This enthroned one is the creator of all things and the one through whom all creatures exist and their very being or existence is down to him and not the Roman emperor.

not Trump, not Macron, not Merkel or May. The one who sits on the throne of Revelation 4, he alone rules, he alone reigns, he alone is the holy king of all creation and none other deserves worship and adoration.

[29 : 08] that's what these creatures who stand in his presence see, know and understand. In the words of one writer, the purpose of this vision is to show us in beautiful symbolism that all things are governed by the Lord on the throne.

what about you? What do you see as you look out on this world? What do you know and understand as you look out on 21st century England?

Maybe you would not call yourself a Christian here this morning. Well, John would have you know that that fact does not change the reality or the truth of Revelation 4.

there is a God who occupies the throne of your world and who belongs on the throne of your life. Do you see, do you know and do you understand this because if not, you really do need to.

That would be John's message here to you if you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian. What this means for the rest of us however, is this.

[30 : 21] Are you concerned about Brexit or the possible future state of the British economy or the result of the up and coming general election? I'll let you onto a great, great secret.

I know exactly who this enthroned one of this universe is going to vote for on June the 8th. Exactly. I'll tell you on June the 9th.

Because whoever gets into power, that's who the Lord on his throne has voted for. So no matter what happens, trust him.

Hold on to your faith. He's still on the throne of the universe and he will be on June the 9th saving the Lord Jesus Christ coming back to put an end to things.

Are you struggling in your marriage and not sure you can keep going for another 5, 10, 20 years?

Are you married and wish you a single again? Are your parenting skills being tested to the limit whether by a terrible toddler or a tantrumy teenager or both?

[31 : 29] I know it may not feel like it but hold on to your faith. This Lord is still on the throne of the universe. Are you struggling to maintain a godly witness in your place of work?

Does it seem like your friends, your neighbours, your work colleague will never come to believe in Jesus? Are you tempted to give up sharing what he means to you? Does your battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil make you feel tired and weary some days?

Well, hold on to your faith in this God. He's still reigning and ruling. Don't despair. Do you have moments or days when you feel so low you don't even want to get out of bed?

Well, hold on to your faith in this God. He's still on the throne even though it may not feel like it. He's holding on to you even when you feel like not holding on to him.

Are you conscious that your body is getting older and frailer and weaker? Are you battling with ill health or having to care for someone who is battling with ill health?

[32 : 46] Well, hold on to that faith. God is still reigning. Are you worried about passing those exams, getting into that university, or securing that job? Are you single and want to be married and worried that no one will want you?

Well, hold on to your faith in this God who has revealed himself supremely in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He's still ruling and reigning.

And this God sent Jesus to show you just how much he loves you. So worship him. Give him the glory, the honor, and the thanks because he is your creator and he is pure and good and he sits on the throne of this universe ruling and reigning.

And can I say, if you would not yet call yourself a Christian, I'd love to talk to you about how you can begin to allow him to reign in your heart and in your life.

Let's bow our heads and have our moments of quiet as we pray together. And he who sat there had the appearance of Jasper and Carnelian and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of Elmer.

[34 : 05] And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within and day and night they never cease to say, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come.

Heavenly Father, give us a vision of who you are. Help us to see, to know and to understand that you do reign, that you are ruling, that you are in control of all that happens.

Help us to hold on to our trust in you that you've given us in and through your son and our saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to trust you and to love you and to give you the honour, the praise and the worship that you deserve.

and we pray these things because of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35 : 16] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.