

Worthy is God

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[0 : 00] Be seated. I encourage you to turn again in the Bibles to page 997 to Revelation chapter 4 and over these last weeks that I'm here at Holy Trinity I'll preach through chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 as our final or my final sermon series here in this church.

So let us pray. Our great God and Father open our eyes we pray to see the glory of heaven. And to live and endure in faith to our life's end so that we may one day be in your eternal presence.

We pray this for the glory of Jesus your son. Amen. There's something special when you get the opportunity to go behind the scenes and see something that's normally out of the way in a sense. I remember some years ago, this is dating it in a sense because you couldn't do it anymore I'm sure, being able to go into the cockpit of a plane. I just asked could I go into the cockpit and have a look and we're flying at the time.

What's more, we're flying to Tel Aviv. And yes, sure, come in. And so I could see down the Greek islands as we flew over the Mediterranean towards Tel Aviv. I'm sure you cannot do it these days at all.

[1 : 26] But it was fascinating to see the pilots basically sitting back doing nothing because it was all on autopilot. I remember my sister showing me around the newsroom of the ABC and seeing the little booth where the newsreader reads the news and all that sort of behind the scenes stuff.

A group from our church, I think earlier this year, went to the Australia Post mail sorting place in Dandenong, I think, and could see behind the scenes in effect, the control room of how our letters get lost or arrive safely occasionally as well.

Revelation 4 is the opening of being taken into the control room of the universe. Like many of these control rooms, it would normally have, I guess, you know, private, no entry, staff only, etc., etc., probably these days security gates and metal beepers and you have to wear things around your neck to get in.

But the door is open. The door of heaven is opened for us. Opened for John, one of the 12 disciples in his old age, late in the first century.

But when he's ushered in to this doorway, he's not told this is confidential, you can't tell anyone. But rather he writes it down.

[2 : 49] In effect, he's told to write it down for the benefit of his contemporaries, but not just them. For the benefit of all those believers in Jesus who come after him, including us, to the end of the age.

After this, I looked and there in heaven, a door stood open. 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.

The end of the first century, Christians were facing persecution. It came in fits and starts for 300 years after Jesus. In the 90s AD, when many regard this as having been recorded and written, was a time of domitian and persecution for Christians in the Roman Empire.

The Christian church was largely relatively small, in one sense inconsequential in the empire, but at times was actually growing and seeing many converts and therefore creating quite a fuss in a way. We see even glimpses of that in the Acts of the Apostles from decades before this time. Many Christians were suffering, many died as martyrs in this period of the 90s and indeed the decades that followed as well.

[4 : 16] To encourage them, to strengthen them, to urge them to keep on in Christian faith, to urge them to be faithful to Jesus to the end, to urge them to overcome and conquer by the blood of Jesus.

This vision is given. This doorway is open. We are invited in to the control room of God. In the chapters preceding this are seven letters from Jesus to seven churches in what is modern day Western Turkey, Ephesus, Smyrna, Laodicea, Pergamum and others.

All those churches, more or less, were struggling in various ways. To them, but indeed to the universal church, this record and this doorway are given to encourage us to look up, to encourage us to see who is in control, to encourage us to endure in faith, even in the face of persecution and opposition for being Christian, to encourage us to see who really is in control.

And the very first thing that John sees when he's transported in this vision by the Spirit to see the control room of history and the universe, the very first thing he sees is a throne.

A throne. A throne. Forty times in this book the word throne occurs, a relatively uncommon word but commonly found in this book. Forty times.

[5 : 57] Because the issue is who is in control? Who is ruling? Who is sovereign? And the throne that he sees in heaven is not the throne of Caesar, the Roman emperor, Domitian, who everybody thought ruled with an iron fist and was a very strong ruler and emperor.

No, the real throne room, behind the scenes, in the control room of heaven is the throne of Almighty God. It's a little bit like the vision that Isaiah gets back in the Old Testament.

There he's ushered into the temple of God and he sees a vision of God, God's glory filling the temple and it's in the year that King Uzziah dies. That is, the real king is God, not the king on earth.

And the same sort of contrast is being made here. The real king, the real throne belongs to Almighty God. And God is showing here, John, what must happen after this.

That is, the controls of history. Who is in control? God. God. And what is the outcome? What is he doing? What is he leading history towards? And it's not what you see, John, when you just look around you on earth.

[7 : 13] Indeed, it's the opposite. Consistent with scripture, God is not easily described. In fact, when we get visions of God in the Bible, we hardly ever get really a picture of God.

If we were to give you the task to take a blank piece of paper and draw God from the descriptions we have in the Bible, what would we get?

We'd get lots of bits and pieces but a lot of vagueness actually. It's like that Ezekiel reading, that's a vision of God but the clarity of description is for those things around God.

But when you get to God himself, well, it's the sort of likeness of the appearance of the glory of the Lord. It's a bit vague. When Moses was on Mount Sinai, covered in cloud, he doesn't really get a glimpse of what God is like.

In fact, we're told that there was no form for God. He didn't reveal himself in any physical form. And the visions of God the same and here no different. God reveals himself not by an image but really by his words.

[8 : 28] You see, we have here in the book of Revelation not pictures of God on his throne in heaven but God's words. And that's how God reveals himself.

One of the great dangers, I think, for Christians is that we somehow think we want a picture. And so in some traditions of church history, we end up with icons and images and pictures and statues and so on, which, to be honest, are detracting from God's revelation to us, which is by words for us to listen and obey rather than by pictures for us to look at and wonder at.

Christian spirituality is a spirituality of God's word to us, not by images and icons and pictures and statues. We don't know what God looks like.

We don't even know what Jesus looked like. But we know what they say. And that, above all, is what matters. And so here, in this picture of heaven at whose centre is God, we get really just a few similarities to things to describe the presence of God.

Beautiful but confusing. At once I was in the Spirit and there in heaven stood a throne with one seated on the throne, not even described.

[9 : 59] And the one seated there looks like, here comes some description, jasper and carnelian, precious stones, an odd description for God. But a description that suggests something precious, something beautiful.

It's imagery that comes out of the Old Testament, from the temple, from even the Garden of Eden, from visions in Ezekiel. And around the throne, immediately you see we're coming away from God. Around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald, which is a bit bizarre because a rainbow has seven different colours, an emerald is green. And so how does a rainbow look like an emerald?

It's almost impossible to put together. You see, John is trying to describe the indescribable. God is beyond description physically. But it's beautiful.

And a rainbow, of course, evokes very clearly, I suggest, the rainbow at the end of the flood in the time of Noah, the famous rainbow of the Bible, that reminds us that though God is the judge, his judgement will be tempered by mercy.

[11:07] And here in this vision of heaven, with God on the throne, the judgement throne, is the rainbow to remind us that God's judgement is tempered by mercy.

What an encouragement for those being persecuted on earth. What a healthy reminder for them of the mercy of God, as demonstrated in the time of Noah, and God still being faithful to his promise that was made with the sign of the rainbow then.

God's throne is enhanced by the things that are around it. Around the throne, in verse 4, are 24 thrones. These are not thrones in competition.

This is not detracting from the throne of God, but actually enhancing it, as we'll see in a later verse. Seated on the thrones are 24 elders, dressed in white robes with golden crowns on their heads. It could be that these are angelic beings. They come again in later chapters. It could be that they're more likely representatives of God's people. They're elders.

[12:15] They're not called angels. They're wearing white robes, which is what God's people later in Revelation will wear. The white robes denote righteousness and purity and holiness and are not earned or achieved by God's people, but are given as a gift, in effect clothed with the righteousness of Jesus the Lamb.

They are there on thrones, in a sense representative of people. The 24 probably is putting together 12 tribes in the Old Testament and 12 disciples in the New. That is the completeness of the people of God from both Old and New Testament times, Jew and Gentile as well.

And they're probably representative of people because they have golden crowns on their heads, as the end of verse 4 says. To the church of Smyrna, in the previous chapter, Jesus, in chapter 2 rather, Jesus said that they are not to fear what they're about to suffer.

The devil is about to throw some of them into prison. But the exhortation to that church was, be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life.

Here in this vision around the throne of God are 24 elders on thrones crowned wearing white robes. Here is encouragement to be faithful unto death.

[13:46] Here is encouragement that death is not the end. Here is encouragement that God reigns, not the emperor Domitian. Here is encouragement that conquering, even maybe dying as persecuted, will actually be a gateway, a doorway into the glory of heaven.

Here is encouragement to endure in faith, not to drift, not to yield to the pressures of persecution or the temptations of this world.

This dazzling throne we then see in verse 5 is the source of a mighty thunderstorm. Coming from the throne there are flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder.

Some people are afraid of thunderstorms. I actually quite like them and the louder the thunder the better I reckon and the brighter the lightning the better. This thunderstorm, this lightning and thunder come from the very throne of God.

He is the one who is sovereign over all aspects of nature. Thunder and lightning are sometimes demonstrative of the presence of God in the Old Testament may be suggestive of God's judgment which would come from a throne but here it's God who's in charge of these things.

[15:09] We ought to take comfort from that and not be afraid of those things. And then in front of the throne we're told in the end of verse 5 burn seven flaming torches which are the seven spirits of God.

One of the difficulties in Revelation is weighing up the symbolism. Most of the symbolism comes out of the Old Testament. That is the keys to it are already there.

The style of writing lends itself to that symbolism. It's an apocalyptic writing. The seven torches probably represent the famous Jewish candlestick which has seven branches on it, a menorah. Still today Jewish people will burn seven candles on their menorah for Sabbath days and other festivals and so on. Here are the seven lamps so it's suggestive of the presence of God.

The big menorah would be in the Jerusalem temple, the presence of God being denoted there. Here it is in heaven, the real temple, the real dwelling place of God. The seven spirits, seven is a perfect number in Hebrew because that's how many days there are in a week.

[16:20] So the completeness of the Spirit of God is perhaps suggested by this symbolic number seven. The presence of God is there is what this lamp is saying to us.

This is a place of awe and majesty, the full terrifying force of a thunderstorm, the glorious light of this seven branched candlestick and so on and yet we still really don't know what God looks like. A sense of distance is created in the next verse, in verse six. Around and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass like crystal.

Again, notice that it's something like, an analogy is being drawn. We're not told it is a sea of glass or crystal but it's like that. Whether it's actually a sea that's just flat and calm or whether it's something that's more solid that you could walk across like glass or crystal, well, it's something like that.

But a sense of distance in the old Jerusalem temple, there was a great big basin of water in the middle court of the temple. This perhaps is the reality which that is symbolising.

[17:36] It creates a sense of distance from the holiness holiness in the throne of God to the things beyond the sea that we'll see in the weeks to come. It's all contributing to the picture of the glorious holiness of God on the throne of heaven.

Around the throne and on each side of the throne four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. They've got eyes in the back of their head as most of us would like to have.

The first living creature like a lion, the second like an ox, the third living creature like a human face, the fourth like a flying eagle may be representative of all the animate life of creation.

They can look every way. The suggestion of this being right around the throne is contributing to the idea that nothing happens that is not seen. the idea that God sees and knows everything in fact from the throne of heaven.

You know, if you, I've never done this, I'd like to do it one day but you could go to Vic Roads or one of those sort of places and see the traffic in Melbourne, all over Melbourne on television screens everywhere apparently.

[18:54] So you could check out where the trouble spots of, you know, thick congested traffic are and accidents and so on. In a sense, this is God's throne.

He has eyes everywhere. He sees everything. He knows everything. So the encouragement and comfort is that no matter what persecution you face, whether it's from your neighbour next door, from the local authorities, from the emperor to mission, whether it's public or in secret, God knows. God sees. There's nothing that escapes his attention. From his throne of judgement, he sees and knows everything. One level, of course, that should urge us to make sure we live our lives in the knowledge of God seeing us and knowing what we're doing but here in the context of those who are being persecuted and opposed and those perhaps drifting in their faith comes the encouragement that God knows.

Don't think that injustice will go unpunished. Don't think that persecution of Christians will be ignored in the end by God. It won't. He may not immediately act and end persecution in the answer to the first prayer but the exhortation is be faithful until death and so it is here.

God knows he will bring about the right judgement and justice at the end. Let him do that. Trust yourself to him. He is in control.

[20:26] what a comfort that he sees and knows everything. Well hardly ever in scripture do you get descriptions of God that are dispassionate and so it is here.

Almost always when we get descriptions of God and what God has done it overflows, it bubbles up like a volcano into praise of God. You can hardly make a theological statement in the Bible without ending up praising God.

For example in Ephesians chapter 1 Paul speaks about the great things that God has done in saving us and adopting us and forgiving us and giving us the spirit and Jesus dying for us and so on and all the way through that great statement is to the praise of his glorious grace and indeed the whole statement begins with praise be to God.

So it is here heaven is full of praise. It's very different from the way our secular humanist world might think of heaven if it ever does as a place of nice cups of tea and perfect halls in one when you play your golf.

This is a God-centered heaven and it's full of praise of God. So in verse 8 the four living creatures who have six wings and are full of eyes all around and inside day and night without ceasing they sing praise to God.

[21 : 58] Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty who was and is and is to come. Holy, holy, holy. Not because God is Father, Son and Spirit the Trinity but rather because in the idiom holy, holy, holy means the holiest, the superlative beyond comparison in holiness is God.

Echoes the vision from Isaiah chapter 3, chapter 6 verse 3. He is the Lord God the Almighty. Words which we are familiar with, words which are in some of our hymns but in John's day words that had a little sharp sting in the tail in a sense because the emperor of the day would often claim some form of being like God, often claim some form of worship, the title Lord or Almighty, sometimes they arrogate it to themselves but here, rightly, it is God who is the Lord, God, the Almighty, not Caesar. He was and is and is to come. He's timeless. He's not going to die. He's not going to be killed by a rival. He's not going to die in battle against an enemy like all the Roman emperors. He was at the beginning.

He is now. He will be in the future. There is an endless perspective. God is sovereign in both place and time. He knows things from the beginning and right to the end.

So entrusting yourself to Him is a reliable thing to do. God's not going to end at some point and therefore make your trust of Him worthless but He is sovereign for eternity.

[23 : 39] This vision of praise is again to motivate Christians on earth struggling, drifting, persecuted Christians to keep on with God being faithful to the end.

Well now the living creatures are joined by the elders, the 24 elders. It's as though we've had just a brief song from the four living creatures and now in response and in addition building a crescendo the 24 living, 24 elders on their thrones they join in the song of praise.

It's a slightly odd way of introducing it in verse 9 whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the one seated on the throne then so do the 24 elders. The whenever.

If you just read verse 9 you could think well yeah every Saturday morning or Sunday morning they're going to give praise so they'll join in but actually we were told in verse 8 day and night without ceasing they sing.

So presumably the 24 elders are also unceasing in their praise and worship of God. So whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks that's always unceasing and they're giving thanks to God who's on the throne who lives forever and ever.

[24 : 56] the 24 elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever and they cast their crowns before the throne.

You see their thrones are not in competition with the central throne of God. They're wearing crowns but that's not in competition with the king of the universe, the Lord God Almighty.

They are kings, they are ruling, they're exercising dominion under him and thus enhances his own sovereignty. You see God's purpose for humanity from the first chapter of the whole Bible was to exercise dominion but under God.

And of course history in the world shows us that humans are very keen to exercise dominion but rather in competition with God, putting God out of the picture and wanting to rule without him.

But here in heaven we come back to the proper picture. God is on the throne, he is sovereign and the 24 elders representative of God's people of all times and places, wearing crowns showing their own dominion, actually now take off their crowns in bowing down before the Lord God the Almighty.

[26 : 20] As that great Christian hymn says, casting down their golden crowns beside the glassy sea in praise of God, acknowledging the real authority and they sing, they sing presumably with the four living creatures because they end up also in praise.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that we spontaneously praise what we enjoy and praise completes the enjoyment.

Sometimes when I've gone on holidays by myself, I've enjoyed the places I visit but there is an essential frustration at times.

Stand before something beautiful and majestic. I remember last year being at the Taj Mahal by myself and I wanted to say to whoever was next to me, wow, isn't this fantastic?

But I didn't know them. So, when you travel with other people, you end up praising together and the joy is actually completed and fulfilled by your praise with other people.

[27 : 37] There's an element of frustration when you see something magnificent. You want to say, wow, isn't this fantastic? But you're just by yourself. C.S. Lewis I think is right that our enjoyment is actually increased in the sharing of praise.

It completes our enjoyment. And so here in heaven, here are the 24 living creatures in the presence of Almighty God and in a sense spontaneously compelled to praise.

to praise God because of his glory and greatness and goodness. And all our theology of God, all our understanding of God and experience of God should be driving us day by day and in heaven unceasingly to praise God.

You are worthy, 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. Worthy are you, here addressed to God rightly, but on earth so often addressed to the emperor.

Our translation loses a little bit of the punch here. Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive the glory, the honour and the power.

[29 : 02] power with the suggestion that it's not, yeah, you're worthy of glory and honour and power but down on earth, well, the emperor, well, yeah, he's worthy of glory and honour. No, no, this excludes that on earth because God is worthy of thee.

All the glory and the honour and the power is the punch behind the expression. Why? Because he created all things. So, all things represented by the living creatures and the 24 elders, all things are to praise him and honour him.

Not only did God create but all existence is due to him. The sense in the next line, by your will they exist and were created is not just that God created it all and then let it all run but that he still maintains this creation and sustains this creation and provides for it and thus is worthy of the praise of heaven.

How good to know that God reigns on the throne of heaven. For when you and I look around our world it is not always evident.

In a world, in our society that is increasingly secular, dismissive of God, anti-God, trying to marginalise him, how good to know that God is on the throne of heaven.

[30 : 28] And for Christians who are persecuted, whose lives are at risk in so many parts of our world, how good to know that God reigns.

Not their government or their emperor, not some other God but the living God of the Bible. When the gospel falls on deaf ears, when it seems like we may be inconsequential in the world, a handful of Christians, for some they may not know many, how good to know that God reigns over this universe.

And when we are tempted to drift away, to let our love for God dissipate into lukewarm piety, how good to be reminded that God reigns in heaven.

Time and again the New Testament urges us to look up to the sovereignty of God in heaven. Earlier this year I preached from Colossians and there we're exhorted to look above, to the things above, where Christ is seated at God's right hand, to motivate us to keep on living.

That's what's happening here in Revelation. For struggling, drifting, persecuted Christians, look up, look through the door that John was ushered into, to see the control rooms of the universe and be comforted and encouraged by knowing who's in control, by seeing who's on the throne, by trusting that God reigns supreme.

[32 : 18] My friends, in three weeks I leave this church and I exhort you for the rest of your lives on earth, do not give up following almighty God.

Do not let your faith drift, do not let the temptations of this world draw you away, do not let the pressures or opposition or persecution of this world dull your commitment to God.

Do not let your love for him become neither hot nor cold. Keep your eyes fixed through the door that John goes through and that we are beckoned through by his words.

Look again to the control room of the universe and know that God is on the throne, glorious, majestic and holy.

And one day, as we'll see in the weeks to come, you and I will physically and eternally be part of this place.

[33 : 34] you are worthy, 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.

Amen.