

Cultures in Heaven - Cultures on Earth

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[0 : 0 0] well it is great to be here and to be able to open this part of God's Word I don't know if you read Revelation very often or heard many sermons on it I fear sometimes we think it's the opposite of a revelation that way it's a kind of a confusion so I hope that doesn't happen tonight and I hope you get a glimpse of what God is wanting to say to us in this particular chapter chapter 5 it seems to me that we Christians have an onus on us I address us I guess most of us a Christian if you're not I'm glad you're here I hope you learn some stuff and it prompts you to think some more as well about the faith but it seems to me that there is an onus on Christians to understand the world better than other people not better in a competition but just to understand it because we want to when we know our father God who owns this world it's natural that the kids want to kind of run around in the playground a bit you know know the house know his his ownership and sometimes we want to just so we can pray better sometimes we want to just because it helps us to relate to other people in the world but it seems to me that that is a fairly natural thing for

Christians to want to expand their perspective on the world and the great thing about the book of Revelation and just this little portion we're going to look at is it gives us an understanding of the world so much of what we do is just focused here on earth on a kind of a you know a single plane and we hear about things in the news we're on the net and we see what's happening famines and wars and disasters and persecution of Christian people particularly we can see those things and and just to understand it is difficult sometimes but what we get in in this book and in this chapter is another perspective it's the perspective from heaven and the whole book is structured as a vision that John has had and it's like he's caught up the phrase it's used he's in the spirit on the Lord's day a Sunday he's caught up and he gets this vision of what heaven is about and the idea is that as we look at this it would give us a perspective so that when we we read the papers we hear the news we reflect on this world we sometimes think about our own experiences as we've traveled or where we've come from this heavenly perspective will speak to us and give us insight and there is a wonderful thing for us in this when we get that idea we haven't read it but chapter four this that's this scene begins that the book of revelation is set out in several scenes seven in fact and then an eighth as is a common uh biblical pattern and in chapter four the scene begins and it's this this classic picture of heaven and it's there's a big throne well of course you're gonna have that in heaven as big throne and on it is the the ancient one the ever-living one god himself and it's this magnificent picture naturally enough there's all these people and angel type creatures and all these people around worshipping him i reckon if you were there you'd be doing the same you couldn't help yourself and that's the idea that we see in chapter four but what we see is there's a problem you don't kind of expect that you think if you're going to see up in heaven it'll all be perfect but there's a problem it's a curious problem because in the hand of this ever-living one god himself is a scroll and it's got these seals down you like the old kind of wax seals that sort of idea there's this sealed scroll in the hand of god himself and the problem is it's a thing that needs to be opened but no one can open it no one is found worthy of opening it it's a funny idea isn't it who is worthy of such a thing and yet that's the the the concept here no one is good enough no one is able to take that scroll and open it later you find out what that scroll is about if you read on in chapter six and seven the seals are broken and as each one is is broken then a new understanding of what the world is about and most of it's pretty negative wars and famines these things but the idea is that if somebody could open it then they could somehow superintend all those things they could manage those things they could somehow in the in the revelation what would be revealed to us is what it means for god and therefore what it means for us coming down from heaven not just looking at the plane we look at and so there's there's something to be revealed here for us something about god now what happens is that we have this this drama this problem and uh john the writer who is caught up in

seeing this we're told he he weeps bitterly says one translation he cried and he cried i don't know if you've ever had that experience i'm thinking fetal position i'm thinking life disaster stuff that's the sort of experience that he has because he's so caught up this scroll needs to be open otherwise the world is a is a trauma

without anyone overseeing it that's the picture this great tearfulness of john it matters in the flow of this story that someone be found worthy and of course as we've just read in chapter 5 one is found the lord jesus christ himself it's interesting because the language that's used for jesus it doesn't say and jesus came up and took the scroll it's not that at all john is is there and and somebody nearby one of the elders says to him there is someone he points to him and the the language he uses he describes him as the lion of judah it goes back to the old testament language of the great king of god the lion of judah the one that would rule over all the world he is the one that's pretty natural person you'd think isn't it who would be able to come and open this scroll and as the elder points john looks and he doesn't see a lion he sees a lamb that was slaughtered isn't that curious thing about the christian faith just where you think you'll get the most crushing power you get the most humiliated death it's talking about the reality of who christ is on the cross and so bound up in this revelation this understanding of the world and of history is we've got to understand christ on the cross and until we get that we won't have understood things from heaven's perspective now we're not going to deal with all what that means today but i hope you go back and look at it some more later and read through this but what we have here is this this revealing of christ as the lion who is also the slaughtered lamb the sacrifice the one who took on himself our sins that we might then be forgiven if we didn't have this new testament perspective of christ who dies on the cross for us and we didn't interpret the world through that i think we'd be stuck back with the sort of insight that job had now job in the old testament had some great insights to suffering basically one major lesson you'll get through it and god's there that's that's kind of it now there's all sorts of other things and great stuff in the book of job all sorts of insights that job just he doesn't understand what's going on until god reveals himself and says i'm here you can't understand what's going on but i'm here now that's enough actually the great thing is we get more much much more in the new testament and this passage is trying to say to us that the christ who has died for us is part of that much much much more that'll help us interpret the world our own lives our own societies our world in a different kind of way as we get that glimpse of the meaning for christ for god of christ and the death of christ then we'll understand history and our society we won't get everything we want but we'll get a lot of comfort and my encouragement to you is to meditate around that thought i doubt that just you hearing me say it now will be sufficient i think it's the kind of thing we've got to pray through and be uh considered about and keep coming back to the reality of the death of christ for what it means for us understanding this world but my first point really is that christ and his death unlocks the meaning of history and i think that's the point of chapters four and five this inversion the lion is the lamb who was slain and he is worthy to take the scroll and therefore to be the one who will superintend history as bad as it is we see in some of these chapters as bad as it is it's not out of control there is an ultimate purpose being served through all the things that happen in this world it's got much more to do with what god intends than what we want the fact that such a one is there and is worthy and comes up and takes the scroll leads to praise

there's a lot of praise goes on and i hope you're good at praising because you're going to do a lot of it just as i am once we get there and so what happens is people there's this lovely little phrase they sing a new song because it's like all of a sudden people grasp the point up in heaven about what christ's death means verse 9 chapter 5 verse 9 and they sang a new song you are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slain and with your blood you purchased men for god from every tribe and language and people and nation you've made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our god and they will reign on the earth well there's great praise to christ for his death and notice this there's great praise to god because he has gathered a people as this is a very common theme in the scriptures and it's a good thing for us to reflect on those those unity ideas that there is one body and christ is the head that there is one flock and christ is the shepherd that there is a kingdom and he is the king that there's a household the people of god and he is the chief householder the master of the house these are all uh these are all great images of unity but notice the point in this passage is not so much the unity it's the diversity of the people and it's not just in this chapter you jump forward into chapter seven you see exactly the same idea same kind of phrases it's not that they've all come together and there's just one big mass of humanity worshiping god that it wouldn't be a bad thing but the point here is that they are from every tribe and language

and race and nation whatever it might be all these groups are represented before god and are worshiping christ i think it's a really profound idea because we don't often think about it that way this is i think part of the deep reality of what god is doing in our world and i think it relates to our world very directly in terms of culture the way we think about our society the way we get on here in australia the way we think about others getting on in their place god is working out his purposes he is committed to this world we see that's the death of christ so committed christ will die but here we have this theme of the the difference of people all those differences coming together and being true worshipers it's not that they're kind of rank ordered some are closer some are further away they all gather in their diversity to worship god for what he's done in christ just let me give you a clue and i think this is an idea i've been reflecting on more and more over the last decade greatly advantaged by traveling to many places and talking to many christian leaders so let me share it with you the idea is not that god wants one group of people that are all bland all the same he doesn't want all the people in the world to be like you or like me the idea is that he wants our culture to be perfected and worshiping and he wants every other culture every other society to be perfected and worshiping now just as in our culture that'll mean that those other cultures will have to leave certain things aside call some things evil in their culture as indeed we should in ours be a nice idea for you over a cup of tea later to say what are your top three things that we'll call evil in our culture it's a great question to ask to challenge ourselves about what we see here whatever culture and subcultural groups we might be a part of in australia it's really worth us thinking about those things and the aim is that in each place we would set aside certain cultural things and we would embrace others and others we'd say this bit's good let's amplify that because god wants that to be perfected before him i found this such a stimulating and challenging thought in terms of how i think about other cultures i encourage you to reflect on it some more let me uh just go on then to my uh my third point i don't know if you're following the points are you there uh the area that there's there's all these cultures in heaven that makes a difference for how we think about earth when we think about mission when we think about the way the gospel is shared from one place to another how is that to be done it's interesting in the dvd in that little video did you see where one of the the women the graduate from meg's college said unless we live as true disciples of jesus unless they see jesus in us they won't believe our words that's true everywhere but it has a particular cultural meaning uh there in myanmar doesn't it's going to look very different there than it does here as to how it is we live for christ how they see christ in us so that they might hear the words of christ it makes a big difference how we think about mission how we think about how we pray all sorts of implications when we think okay the aim in this whole world is for each cultural group each people group to be perfected so that their culture relates and rejoices and praises god i've been reading uh quite a bit lately in the area of um cross-cultural theology and uh in terms of theological education pretty naturally for me and uh one of the um indian writers that i've been reading a guy called siga alz now i've actually met him in uh some conferences and things and he's a leader of a bible college in india he had a very helpful four concepts the first three are pretty common in mission language it's the the idea of three self ideas the first self idea you know when you go into a place and a church is planted first thing you wanted is for it to be self-administering you don't want it to be all dominated from the outsiders whether we're talking about westerners dominating or people from southern india dominating the northern indians which happens a fair bit by the way or some other group like that you actually want to grow a church which is self-administering that's the first self the third the second self idea is self-propagating um that that church would own the task of evangelizing the next village and the neighbors one of the problems in pakistan the church there that's happened is that the missionaries came and when they planted churches they said okay now you go and grow up as christians we'll go and evangelize the next village and so evangelism happened i'm simplifying of course but evangelism basically happened by only westerners did evangelism and church planting and so there was no self-propagation no self ownership of the growth of the spread of the gospel the third self is self-funding you know when i talk to a lot of christian leaders around the world in the developing world one of the big problems many of them have is the perception amongst their countrymen that christianity is foreign it's western and it comes with western money and it only is flourishing in parts of the world because of western money and one of the things that many of them just long for is to have the resources that are local and they're so proud when they raise up local benefactors whether it's for a tiny amount lots of them or a few big ones they're so thrilled to be able to say we paid for this ourselves the language they talk about is we want the the gospel to be in our

soil growing up and that's money is a big part of that how is this thing funded is it in the hearts of people such that they will be generous and back their church now those three ideas self-administering self-propagating self-funding are really common as i say thing in in mission literature it's even interestingly been picked up in china uh the official church in china is called the three self

[17 : 28] patriotic movement it was a missionary idea i think it started in the 1920s in china particularly they were talking about it and then when all the christians got kicked all the missionaries got kicked out out of china when the communists took over after the second world war they kicked them all out and they said we're going to have our own church it won't have all this western influence it'll be patriotic and it'll be three self isn't that interesting the language was picked up the missionary language was picked up and incorporated officially by the atheistic chinese government but it was the patriotic movement in other words it's for china and there's um there's some problems with that church and there's some changes in that church which are far more promising thing uh there are of course um probably 10 to 20 times more christians outside the three self-patriotic movement churches the official registered churches we call them the underground church but they call themselves the family churches or the house churches and what a joy it is that god has worked in so many different ways and so there's that those three selves but there's a fourth says seagulls there's a fourth he says what you need really at the deepest level in order for those other things to actually be achieved you need self-theologizing in other words you need people who are local intelligent leaders of the church who can see in the scriptures themselves and look at their culture look at their society and apply this word of god to that society at that time to write the theology textbooks basically that's how it comes down to who writes the textbooks now let me tell you that most of the books in most libraries around the world are written by westerners why because there's more of them with phds who write books and they write them for which culture mostly western culture and most of the topics they deal with well maybe half of them are generic across the world the other half relate very much to western culture you know if you come and study theology here in australia as i did most of the topics you know we really apply the gospel to affluence and irreligion that's what we apply the gospel to constantly constantly thinking about the australian people and how to apply it to them now there are subgroups that are different in a congregation like this is fairly obvious chinese immigrant people in australia where they're passing through the university system and going back or coming and settling and many of them are very open and praise the lord that people are taking up the opportunity in that subgroup and the topic there is not rejecting atheism um that is confronted but people are open to hear about christ but on the whole what we do in australia is we focus on our major cultural situation affluence and irreligion most of asia is poverty and religious might not be christian but it's religious and so if you do your theology based on western textbooks and you're in myanmar about half of the book won't count just won't be relevant won't make any sense all the books that we have here no doubt in this church you've had many sermons well some sermons on the new atheism christopher hitchens and these sorts of people that's absolutely irrelevant in the developing world in most of it anyway because people don't think atheism they think which god that's their question and so what you need is this indian scholar says you need self-theologizing you need people who can actually look at the scriptures and say now what does it say for our context now by definition that means you're going to need lots of different people in all those different places who are doing who are doing that sort of thinking let me just give you a glimpse to one of the things that overseas council australia does and that is we fund bright lecturers at colleges to do better degrees masters and and phds now um very often what happens in the west when people do phds it's just what's your interest oh okay and we're such a wealthy place we can all just follow our own

interest uh what tends to happen in the developing world when people say let's do a phd the principal says we need this one go research this now it's always negotiated but much more mission oriented research let me give you a couple of examples we have funded this guy uh on the faculty of tyrannis bible college in indonesia uh mika susalitano a fine fine christian leader and he did his phd i talked to him afterwards congratulations mika tell me what your topic was i did it in theology and what was the actual topic it was on the concept of union with god in javanese religion i thought that's a little obscure mika why did you do that he said not obscure at all that is the fundamental question for javanese people how do you unite to god in the javanese religion that's what they're all concerned about so what he did was he looked at that and he looked at what it means particularly in

the new testament in the writings of paul union with god via christ so he said what i did was i examined those things so that i could connect with the javanese people that's the biggest group dominant group in indonesia so that i could i could connect with them what union with god through christ is about well that makes a lot of sense and what will you do with it i'm teaching my students already he said so that they can share the faith in a relevant way that will make sense and he said i'm writing i'm writing things so that the the church people can do that same to share their faith with the christian with the non-christian people in their neighborhood uh that's a phd worth doing seems to me self-theologizing oh let me give you another example from uh from uh megs in uh in me and uh peter thien who we paid a couple of his degrees a master's degree and then also his phd and at each one he got better and better at church planting he's planted lots and lots of churches this guy he's a faculty member what do you do in your spare time plant churches and he's gathered a team of church planters around him and i think it's probably the most successful church planting activity in burma ever amongst the buddhists amongst the tribal groups there are many many christians and a lot of churches there but amongst the actual buddhist people are very few churches very few buddhists become christian in that place the stats when you look at it don't look that way because i don't know it might be 10 christian but most of them are from these little subgroups and what he's done is he's did his um phd in communication theory sounds obscure until you say about what about how you communicate the gospel to buddhist people in buddhist ideas one little example which i you know he taught me just straight away he said um yeah you can't say to a buddhist that jesus came from heaven and will take you back to heaven because it's not good enough i go what sounds pretty good to me he said no no because in buddhism heaven is just one of the many life cycles you go around it's up up the top but it's not the best one he says actually what they're longing for is to get out of the cycles to get just back to heaven well it's good but it's not good enough and so he talks about this is his starting point he says jesus came from outside he came from nirvana and he can break you out of the cycles of life and death and rebirth and death and rebirth and death and get you to nirvana now later on he gives them a much more biblical view of things but what he's been doing is he's been teaching the students at the college and this little cohort of leaders with him a thousand people converted already in the last few years it's an extraordinary thing and he teaches them he comes he dresses in traditional clothes and he sits down and he gongs a little gong if he says something important can we gong a gong when i say something no we won't do it here not our culture you see gets a make gong a little gong and they all just sit there and he gets the local musicians not christian people buddhist people and he pays them a few chat is the local currency pays them a few chat and he says will you set this psalm to music please and they'd love to and it's good spiritual stuff and they set the psalms to music and then they'll sing it and play it for them it does all these things in incredibly cultural ways and just gradually step by step helps them to see that christ is the answer to what they're longing for that's a phd worth funding delighted that we did it he's written a couple of books about it he's the kind of guy that other people do their phds on because it's so clever so this is the kind of thing that uh this indian scholar was getting at we've got to have self-theologizing in order to have those other great developments in a church self-administering self-propagating self-funding well let me finish up when we look around at the world and we see the kinds of things that are outlined in these few chapters of revelation the wars the famines the persecution of christian people the judgment of god and all sorts of different ways it helps us to understand where christ fits into that and i encourage you to go and reflect on this passage and pray it through it's not an idea that you can just skate over i've got it it won't work like that you're going to have to work it through in your own prayers and pick up a newspaper or flick through a thing on the net and see and then start praying it through again and to notice that in heaven the ones that praise him come from all these different tribes and nations and tongues fulfilling the blessing to abraham do you listen carefully that first reading from genesis i'll bless you abraham that you might be a blessing to all other peoples and that's what's fulfilled in this vision and so for us then to understand for our prayers for mission prayers for other christian places is that they might be able to raise up a self-theologizing church place that looks at the scriptures and looks at their culture and works out what god wants them to do and perfects their culture pushes away the evil embraces what's good magnifies that and delivers that to god in heaven that's the final image it's a glorious thing and we're part of it and we've got a task in it too let me pray father just for a little moment we want to imagine ourselves gathered around the lord jesus christ praising him he's worthy worthy beyond all things we could imagine his death for us that allows us such access we thank you father for the perspective that we get from him superintending all of

history all of time all of societies and thank you father we're caught up and gathered around that throne that our culture can be there our people can be there we thank you for that father we rejoice as we take this little pretend glimpse around at others different from us so different and yet your vision that their cultures would be perfected different but perfect we thank you for that vision father we thank you for the the one household the one flock the one nation under you and yet all these different groups help us to live more in this reality we pray and live for you better here in jesus name amen