

One seated on the Throne

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 August 2017

Preacher: Alasdair I Macleod

- [0 : 00] Would you please turn back to our reading in the New Testament in the book of Revelation and chapter 4. And I want to look tonight at some of the teaching of this whole chapter as John receives this vision of God.
- We'll read again just in verse 2, Revelation 4 and 2. At once I was in the spirit and behold a throne stood in heaven with one seated on the throne.
- Sometimes we use words carelessly I suppose. I do, maybe you do. We describe things in ways that they don't deserve.
- When I was working with a congregation of mostly young people, some of them were British and some of them were American. And there were two words they used.
- Americans used one word and the British used another word. And each found the other person's language strange. You would, for example, show a British student maybe an address.
- [1 : 26] They wanted to know someone's address and you would open, you know, this is a few years ago. So you can just flick something on your phone. So you would show them the address, maybe written in a booklet.
- And the British would say, brilliant. Brilliant. And the Americans would, what's brilliant about that? Is it intelligent or is it shining?
- I don't see the book shining. You do the same thing with an American and they would say, awesome. And the British would say, what's awesome about that address in that little booklet?
- There's nothing awe-inspiring about it. But we use these sorts of words and we may be in our country now say, awesome more than we did for all kinds of things.
- And we say, brilliant all the time for things that actually aren't shining very brightly. Now here in this chapter, I want to suggest to you that we see something and we see someone who deserves brilliant and awesome as descriptions of him and all that surrounds him.
- [2 : 46] This God is awe-inspiring. And he dwells in this brilliant heaven. And John is blown away by what he sees and hears as he sees this awesome scene.
- This is truly awesome. And we are called to worship as we see God on the throne. Now as we come into this chapter, I want you to see that John is taken to a door.
- He sees a door standing open in heaven. And he's allowed to look into heaven. Now I'm going to focus on God here as the Father especially.
- And the Father who has created all things. That's the picture, I think. Now, of course, the Son and the Spirit were involved in creation.
- But I think this is a picture of the Father. Now Jesus and the Spirit are in the chapter. You see Jesus involved because it's his voice in verse 1.
- [4 : 04] And the first voice which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet. And that takes us back to chapter 1 in verse 10. I was in the Spirit in the Lord's day and I heard behind me a loud trumpet saying.

And I turned to see the voice, verse 12. And I saw one like a son of man. So the voice here is the voice of the Son of God. It's the voice of Jesus.

So Jesus is speaking here. And the Spirit's also here. You see that John in verse 2 is in the Spirit. And I think that the seven torches in verse 5 are also a reference to the Holy Spirit.

We'll come back to them in a minute or two. So Jesus is here speaking. And the Spirit is here burning. But the vision is particularly of God the Father in control of his universe.

So I want to pick out several things from the passage. I hesitate to tell you how many there are. But I won't spend as long as I did this morning on the sermon.

[5 : 18] But there are seven things that I want you to see. The last couple will probably deal with very quickly. Seven things about this God of this passage.

First of all, his sovereignty. We see a throne. We see a God who rules.

Verse 2, I read it for our text. And behold, a throne stood in heaven. And you notice that this throne is not empty.

The throne above this whole universe is not vacant. One seated on the throne.

Now this, of course, is a picture of God the Father as a king. It's a picture of his ultimate rule from the throne from which he governs the whole universe.

[6 : 22] He is sovereign. He is the king on the throne of the whole universe. One of the ways in which this is portrayed for people of that time and culture, when you spoke about a king and a throne, you would then also expect to have a picture of courtiers and attendants around the throne.

And that's true here as well. You look at verse 4, you can see that there are 24 elders on the thrones.

So he's surrounded by this retinue of, I think, angels. Now not everybody agrees with that, but I think they are angelic beings.

We just think about that detail for a second or two. In chapter 5 and verses 9 and 10, there's a celebration by the creatures and the elders of the salvation won by the blood of Jesus.

Now in the authorised version of verse 10, it says you have made us. But most translators now would think that you have made them is a more accurate way of reading that verse.

[7 : 59] So that the living creatures are angelic, of course. And I think the elders are angelic beings as well. So the translation I have in front of me here in the pulpit says in verse 10 of chapter 5, you have made them a kingdom and priests.

The elders are singing praise to God, not for their own salvation because they are unfallen angels, but singing praise because God has redeemed a people to himself by the blood of Jesus.

And these elders, I think the same thing is true right through Revelation. For example, in chapter 14 and verse 3, you have a reference to a new song being sung by the redeemed.

And they sing it before the throne and before the creatures and before the elders. And no one could sing that song except the redeemed. So the elders and the creatures don't sing that song because they're all angelic beings.

So here we have these angels surrounding the throne along with four creatures you see from middle of verse 6 through to verse 8.

[9 : 13] Now these are living angelic beings. They're not beasts as sometimes people translate it, but they are four living creatures.

And when you compare what's said here with the book of Ezekiel, it seems clear that they are cherubim, specific kind of angelic beings.

They are cherubim. And then we also have a reference to the realm of this king. That's the other thing you would expect if you heard about a king. He would be on a throne, surrounded by his courtiers, and he would have a kingdom over which he rules.

So what's the realm of this king, according to this chapter? Well, it's the whole of the universe. It's the whole of creation.

This is the throne room of the universe. If you look at the end of verse 12, you created all things, without exception, and by your will, they existed and were created.

[10 : 25] So every corner of the universe is the realm of this king. Everything made by him. Everything under his sovereignty.

Everything by his divine will. So what this throne is, is the operation center of the universe.

The nerve center of the whole cosmos. We can only illustrate it in terms of very small scale things.

You know, you go to maybe a large airport when you're abroad on holiday. And there'll be a control tower above everything.

people looking down on the whole airport and guiding everything that happens. A nervous center at the heart of that airport. Well, here's the control tower of the universe.

[11 : 24] God himself on the throne directing the whole thing because he has made it all. He sustains it all.

It is all by his will. It is all under his control. And it's all for his own glory. It's an amazing picture, first of all then, of his sovereignty from the throne.

Secondly, I want you to think of this. His mystery. The mystery and the depth of God.

The God who transcends everything and everyone else and the God who transcends our understanding. I want you to notice here that God is not described.

in verse 2, one seated on the throne. That's all he says. Some translations will just say with someone seated on the throne.

[12 : 33] Then if you look at verse 3, all he can say is and he who sat there had the appearance of this and the appearance of that.

Remember we read in Ezekiel chapter 1 and these final verses of Ezekiel, I don't know if you noticed that the prophet as he's speaking about the vision he has, he keeps talking like appearance or likeness or as it were.

He can't quite get the words that will completely sum up what he's seeing and he knows anyway that even if he got the words that would sum it up, it couldn't possibly say what God deserves to be said about him.

So all he can say is it had a sort of appearance of a sort of likeness as it were of this. So he says in verse 28 of Ezekiel 1 that he saw the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God.

He didn't see God, he saw the glory of God. He saw the likeness of the glory of God. He saw as it were the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God.

[13 : 54] Words fail him because God is beyond description. God is transcendent. God is awesome.

God is a part of the message too of the mystery of many things that we read in a book like this.

You know I've just been thinking about the elders for a minute or two and I think they're angels but other people don't. And then you ask why there are 24 elders and people say well maybe that's because sometimes the Old Testament you read about 24 divisions of priests and other people say no it's because they're speaking of the church and there are 12 tribes and 12 apostles and then people say and what about the creatures?

They're cherubim? Yes. Are they like the cherubim of Ezekiel? Yes. But they're not exactly the same as the cherubim of Ezekiel. And you see the point is that we're called to ask questions and we're called to find answers and it's good for us to try to puzzle out by God's help what these things mean.

But often when you get an answer to one of these questions it just leads to another set of questions. And then you start answering these questions and you just get even more questions because we will never have a final answer in this world to many of these things.

[15 : 33] And I think part of what God is doing through books like this is not just allowing us to exercise our imagination and our intellect as we enjoy these books and try to understand the details.

But all the time he's also saying God is so great that you will never grasp him. You will never understand all the details.

And even when you understand a detail it takes you to something else that you don't understand. Sometimes our God is too small and these books are saying we have a great God.

We have a deep God. We have an inexhaustible God. And we will spend all eternity asking questions and getting answers that lead to more questions and to more answers.

Because by definition only God knows everything there is to know about God and his works and his ways. So God is inexhaustible.

[16 : 42] And here I think that God in some of his mystery is being portrayed by the questions that arise in our minds and by the fact that he can't be described, all you can get is the appearance of the likeness of the glory and beauty of this God.

We mustn't have a God who is too small, who can be captured by us with our minds. God is great.

God is mysterious. And then thirdly, I want you to think about his beauty, his beauty, the beauty of this God, the God who, as it were, sparkles here in various ways.

Let me think of a couple of things. First of all, think of the light and the jewels that you have here, the gems of verse three, and all the brightness and brilliance that you're reading of here.

these, I think, are pictures of beauty. This viewer, John, is blown away by these dazzling facets where the light just bounces off one facet after another.

[18 : 10] If you have ever, even going into a jeweler, you notice against a dark cloth lots of lights, and as you move your eyes, these things are dancing with their brilliance.

If you go to see a display of royal jewels, again, the same thing. Very bright lights, partly for security, but partly also so that the light will dance off every single facet of every jewel.

So here in the brightness of heaven, there are all these gems and jewels, dazzling John, and I think they are meant to be pictures of beauty.

It's almost as if they are on fire, and they sparkle in the light. As it were, God, it's saying God sparkles in his own light.

God is the source of all splendor, and all light, and all brilliance, and all beauty. And whenever we say, wow, that's something that dazzles us in creation, we're meant to remember that the God who made that is by definition more beautiful than what has been made.

[19 : 40] He is beautiful beyond anything we see in the most amazing diamonds in this world, or the most amazing view in the beauty of creation.

I was reading somebody a little while ago talking about a view in England, and he spoke like this about God.

God is in himself for his own sake lovely. The first time I realized that was when I was about 25 years of age, and I walked up to a big hill in Gloucester in England.

It was a famous hill. You walk up a long, dusty hill from the Gloucester side. You can't see anything except about two yards of dusty road in front of you.

You come out on the top of the hill, and there is perhaps the loveliest, softest landscape in the whole of England. Spread out to view is the whole valley, with Gloucester Cathedral towers standing up in the middle, and this gorgeous view stretching right away to the mountains.

[20 : 49] I suddenly realized it wasn't anything in me, it was something in the view which had wrenched the admiration out of me, and this crucially, and that it had been just as lovely while I had been coming up the hill, and I couldn't see it at all.

God is like that, for his own sake, in his own self, apart from anything that he does for me, God just is lovely, says that man.

And I think that's part of what's being portrayed here in this vision and revelation, something of the loveliness of almighty God.

beauty, but also in connection with beauty here, I want you to think just for a little about the sea that John sees before the throne.

You see in verse 6, before the throne, there was, as it were, a sea of glass like crystal. I think that's also meant to be a picture of beauty, that this sea is like crystal, it's completely clean, and completely pure, and it's just flat, and glassy, and perfect, and the light is sparkling on that crystal sea.

[22 : 26] Now, we could spend a lot of time thinking maybe about the different ideas people have about that sea. I think it's a symbol of cleansing.

You have a sea in Solomon's temple, a laver, and I think this is picking up something of that kind of picture. a vast laver called a sea in the temple of Solomon.

And I think this is picking up that symbol, and it's a sign in heaven of the cleansing that has happened for God's people.

And the sea is there, and it's flat, calm, and it's like crystal, and it's beautiful, and it sparkles. I mean, Lachatuah, for all its beauty, has nothing on this particular sea.

Now, some of you might think it's strange language to use to talk about the loveliness of God and God the Father.

[23 : 37] But I think for many of you, maybe for most of you, maybe for all of you, that's not strange language. for the world around us, it would sound odd. They think of many things that are beautiful, and many people that are beautiful, but they don't think of God as beautiful.

But I think these images in John, these jewels, and this sea, sparkling in the most brilliant light in the universe, are saying God is beautiful, and God sparkles in his own light.

and when somebody sees the loveliness of God, they're seeing what is really there. Beauty is already there without the beholder, because God is just beautiful in himself, and he always has been, and he always will be.

And what we are called to ask the spirit to do in our lives is to help us see the beauty of God, that we might be attracted to that real beauty, as we trust in Jesus and give ourselves to the triune God.

Beauty. Fourthly, I want you to see his holiness. His holiness. Now, again, I think this is pictured in a couple of ways.

[25 : 03] The first portrayal here of God's holiness, and the holiness of God is often in the Bible a dangerous quality, isn't it?

It's in the lightning and the thunder of verse 5. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings, and peals of thunder.

You see, in the ancient world, and for many in the world today, the greatest power they know is the power of nature unleashed in ferocity.

If you ask many people across the world what's really powerful and what they're really afraid of, they might say they're afraid of a tsunami, or they're afraid of a volcanic eruption, or whatever it might be in their own part of the world.

Nature unleashed in a terrible storm is a very frightening, dangerous thing. And in the book of Revelation, I won't take you through the passages, but more than once through the book, there are references to flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, and it's always associated with the holiness of God coming in judgment on people.

[26 : 30] So here's a picture of holiness then. Here's a picture of God as the judge of the universe, on the throne of the universe, this one who is thrice holy, this great and awesome God.

But his holiness, I think, is also seen in the fire and the torches of fire, which are before the throne.

You know how often in the Bible, fire is a symbol of the holiness of God. Remember Moses, the burning bush, the fire of God in the bush, but the bush is not consumed, and Moses is aware of the holiness of God, and he takes off his sandals because the place where he's standing is holy ground.

The same with Sinai, with fire coming down on the mountain, and the people tremble. So fire is so often a symbol of the holiness of God, and so here.

And I think in particular, this is a symbol of the holy spirit, the divine spirit, the spirit of fiery holiness.

[27 : 52] Now again, you might ask, well, where do you get that from? because there are seven torches, and it says there are seven spirits, and we know there's only one fiery holy spirit.

Well, in books like this, very often the number seven is a picture of perfection. So you might say sevenfold.

So this could be a picture of the spirit in that sense, the seven fold spirit, the spirit of complete fire, and complete power, and complete holiness, the seven fold spirit of God.

Now let me suggest to you one place where I think that is confirmed at the beginning of the book of Revelation, in chapter one, and in verses four and five.

Now I think four and five are giving you the trinity, okay? In this order, father, spirit, and son.

[29 : 09] So chapter one in verse four, John to the seven churches, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. That's the father.

father and from the seven spirits or the seven fold spirit who are before his throne. And then he says and from Jesus Christ.

Well, there are three persons mentioned there. Well, two clearly are mentioned. The first is the father and the last is the son. So who is the person or who's being referred to in the middle when it says the seven spirits?

It must be a reference to the Holy Spirit because it's a reference to God, the father, then the sevenfold spirit, and then the son.

So from the book of Revelation itself, I think these seven torches, these seven spirits are a reference to the Holy Spirit, the sevenfold spirit of God in all of his fiery, burning, purifying holiness in heaven and for us on earth.

[30 : 26] So his holiness, the holiness of God is so clear here. The holiness of the father who is holy, holy, holy, and the holiness too of the Holy Spirit before the throne.

And then fifthly, if I'm counting right, I want you to think about his worthiness just very quickly, the worthiness of God. The God who receives worship, who receives doxology from his creatures.

If you look at verses eight and following, you can see that these living creatures orchestrate praise that is unceasing.

And the creatures sing about what God is. Holy, holy, holy, he's pure. The Lord God almighty, he's powerful.

Who was and is and is to come. He's permanent. So they sing about the purity and the power and the permanence of God.

[31 : 35] God. And then the elders, they're being referred to, I think, in the song at the end. Maybe the creatures are involved in that song too.

But from verse 10, the elders fall down and they concentrate on what God has done. He's worthy to receive glory and honor and power because he's created.

and he looks after all things. And when you think of it, doesn't that sum up what we want to say and sing in worship? One group sing about what God is in himself.

And the others sing about what God has done for his universe. And so when we praise God, when we worship, we do these two things.

We celebrate what God is in his own being, who he is. But we also celebrate what he has done for us in creation and in redemption.

[32 : 38] And when I say worthiness, I use that word because the word worship comes originally from the language of worth ship. And what worship is, is giving the worthy God the worth ship that he deserves.

you're just giving him his due, what he deserves. He deserves that we celebrate who and what he is, and that we celebrate what he has done for us.

We worship him. Here are these creatures and elders in heaven worshipping him. And the whole of heaven joins in the song. And we are called to add our voices to heaven's praise.

That's something that actually you should remember that you do when you praise God any time. And perhaps in a special way on the Lord's day. You are joining your voices with the voices of heaven.

You're praising the God on the throne. You're praising the Lamb in the midst of the throne. You're praising the triune God as they are doing in heaven.

[33 : 50] So we on earth are privileged to swell a great chorus. so the church on earth joins with the church in heaven. And we all, whether we're the church militant here or the church triumphant there, along with the angels, we give God something of the worship, the doxology and praise that he deserve.

His worthiness, he deserves all praise. And then sixthly, just very quickly, I want you to think about his distance.

Again, you might think that's a strange word, but it's important to get that sixth word in before the seventh word, his distance. One of the things that seems to be going on in this vision is that John might be being made aware of how difficult it is to get to this God.

I mean, how impossible it is for us to get near this God. We cannot get near him. And John is having that pictured for him with all the images that are used.

So, you remember the imagery of the retinue around God and the cherubim and cherubim in the Bible are guardians of the throne of God.

[35 : 23] And there's that sea and there are these burning torches and the flame up very, very high. And there's the lightning and the thunder and the storm.

And John is looking and he's saying, how can I get to that God? How can anyone get through these guardians and over that sea and past these torches and through the lightning and the thunder and the storm?

So, there's a stress for a moment through these pictures on the difficulty and the barriers between John and any other human being and this God.

It's not easy for us to get near the throne of God. It's a very dangerous place for a sinner to ever think of approaching.

But then the seventh word, his grace. His grace. There are hints in the chapter, chapter four of the grace of God. One great hint is the rainbow around the throne.

[36 : 35] Remember the covenant sign given to Noah? Or the glassy sea before the throne. As I said, I think that's a picture of cleansing. So, there are various hints of God's grace even here.

But the reality of grace is going to be in the next chapter, chapter five. And the lamb in verse six, who approaches the throne and who has the right to approach the throne and who takes a scroll from the hand of him who sits on the throne.

And we say, how did he get there? What right does he have to be there?

And the story of Revelation and the story of the whole Bible is, the lamb can go there because he came from there. This is the son of God who was always the center of worship in heaven with the Father and the Spirit.

And that son who deserves all that worship, that son came from that throne, became incarnate in this world, and did all that was necessary for our salvation.

[38 : 01] And now the lamb who has died for our sins and has been raised from the dead and exalted to heaven, Jesus, that divine lamb can approach the throne because it's his throne.

And he is the God man, as pictured here, coming up to the throne and taking the scroll. Then heaven exalts in praise in chapter 5, that he is worthy because he has shed his blood and redeemed a people for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

And the point I'm making here about distance and then grace is that the more we grasp the distance between us and God by nature, the more we grasp the difficulty and the barriers there are for human beings in their sin to ever get near God, the better we will appreciate the wonder of grace and the distance that the son had to come and all that he had to suffer to deal with all that separated you and me and God.

So the throne of God is inaccessible to me and you, but it's accessible to Jesus. It's his throne. And so in Jesus, the Lamb of God, the inaccessible has been made accessible and we in Christ can approach the throne.

In Jesus, you can approach that throne and you can get past all the barriers and all the guards and all the difficulties and the torches and the lightning and the thunder and the storm.

[39 : 55] You can get right up to the throne of God because Jesus is there and in Jesus, you can be bold in approaching that throne.

There's the wonder of the gospel that the greatness of this God that's so beyond our grasp has given us such a great gospel that too is beyond our grasp.

This is a wow chapter in the Bible. It's so awesome. But what's awesome as well is that the gospel is awesome.

The gospel is brilliant and the gospel invites us to trust in this Lamb and to approach this throne and to know that in Jesus we are safe and secure for all eternity because our Lamb, our Saviour, our Friend and our Lord is tonight in the midst of that very throne.

Amen. We'll leave it there.