

The Throne of God and the Lamb - Evening Service

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[0 : 00] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening, in Christ's name, Amen. Wow. So you heard the reading?

How's that? It's awesome, isn't it? Awesome. So we're doing a series in Revelation, if you knew, and you can tell now we are just in full apocalyptic literature mode, right?

So it's transitioned from kind of letters to churches to full apocalypse now. However, it would be a mistake to spend our whole time sort of picking apart each symbol and trying to find some secret meaning.

Because, you know, Revelation is not a code for us to solve. It's not a mathematical puzzle, right? It's more like an interactive art installation that sort of engages our head and engages our heart and our imagination.

And we're sort of gradually pulled into this vision, into this picture, where we see ourselves and we see God and we see the world in this new light.

[1 : 07] So to understand Revelation, we don't need cleverness. What we need is an imagination. We need an imagination. And we need to love the truth.

So let's get into it. But before we do, it's probably context is always very helpful here. So we've just concluded these seven short letters to the churches. And now we've moved into this just sort of epic vision here.

So what's the connection between these letters to the churches and this vision? You remember that most of these churches were in difficult situations. And some of them, the letter indicates that it was only going to get worse for them.

And so rather than a pep talk, what they need, what they needed, these folks, was a vision of heaven, something that would steady their hearts, a vision that would help them persevere with courageous loyalty to Christ, no matter what the situation is or was.

But it's not just a vision for those churches, though, is it? It's a vision for us. It's a vision for all Christians, for Christians like us in the West who, you know, one of our great temptations is to fall asleep spiritually, just to sort of nod off.

[2 : 28] It's a vision for Christians in northern Nigeria who face the very, very real prospect of being killed by jihadists.

What John sees here in this vision, what he experiences, gives all Christians, no matter their situation, a reason to stick with Jesus, to persevere with Jesus, to stay with Jesus.

And you'll see that as we sort of go through it. And the way that it does that is it gives us a cosmic vision. Because our view of the world, I mean, it literally is horizontal, right?

It's kind of just, we're sort of like this. What we see is quite horizontal. Our horizon is quite low. This is kind of our vision, right? Sort of about here. And what this does is it gives us a vision from God's perspective looking down on the world.

And what it's trying to let us know is this, is that things are not as they seem. There is more going on than we realize.

[3 : 38] I had a friend called Matt Stott. He still is my friend, actually. But he lives in New Zealand. And he has a little boy called Jasper, which is such a great name, isn't it? Jasper.

And he came to visit my wife and I years ago. And so we sort of did some touristy stuff. And I took him to science world, just me and my mate Matt and Jasper.

And after about 15 minutes, I remember thinking, Matt, you are a delinquent parent. You're a terrible parent. Because he would let Jasper just run just amok.

And he would, Jasper would run into all the areas that said, you know, danger, security only, employees only. And some would just be running in and out of the air, running all over the show.

And I noticed that Matt wouldn't do anything for a while. Like, so Jasper would run into an employees only door and Matt would be chatting to me and look over, keep chatting to me, and then wander off to get him.

[4 : 39] And I didn't say anything. And then Matt, after about 20 minutes of this, Matt turns to me and he goes, I let him do that on purpose. And I even kind of nudge him towards these doors.

And I purposely let him go in there for quite a while so that he gets really deep into the back rooms of science world because I want to see what's going on. So his whole strategy was to let his son go in there so he could go in and go, oh, I'm so sorry.

Oh, I've just lost my son. Is he in here? True story. He said to me, literally, I just wanted to see behind the scenes of science world.

And that's his strategy when he sort of goes to these places with his little son there. So this is what Revelation does. Revelation gives us a behind-the-scenes look of the world to steady our hearts. Right, let's get into it now. There are three main things in the vision. Three big things, okay? There's the throne. There's the scroll.

[5 : 51] It's a rolled-up scroll. And there's the lamb. That's basically the sermon, okay? There's three sections. The throne, the scroll, and the lamb. Let's talk about these three aspects of the vision here.

So first, the throne. Verse 1. I looked and behold. Behold. What a great word. Behold, isn't it? Behold. It's actually the most common word in Revelation.

Behold. And what it means, I was talking to somebody about it earlier today. It means to turn around and look at something. So it says that.

It keeps saying that because it's saying, it's saying, turn away from all the stuff that's captured your heart. Turn away from all the stuff that's captured your attention. Turn away from the things that you fear, that you persevere over.

Turn away from that. Turn away from all the unhealthy desires you might have. Turn away from all the things that you're good in your life, but you place way too much emphasis on.

[6 : 55] Turn away from those things and look at this. That's what behold means. Look at this. And what is it that John beholds here in chapter 4 and 5?

Where he sees heaven. And he's attempting to describe something indescribable, hence all of the symbolism. And he says, it's like, he says, it's just like this.

It's like, it's just like colors. Just like all the names of the jewels, right? Because it's colors and flaming, these flaming torches.

And there's thunder. And there's lightning. And there's like, these creatures. And there's people.

And there's this rainbow that's kind of like, like emerald or something.

And there's a sea. And it's like glass. So in the midst of all of this kind of stuff that can sound quite chaotic, just so you know, there's the sea, which in the ancient Near East was always the symbol of chaos.

[7 : 57] But there's a sea, so it's a calm place. And most importantly, in the midst of the color and the torches and these creatures which are baffling creatures and the people and the rainbows and the gems and the sea, in the midst of all of this, right in the middle of it all, there's a throne.

That's the center point. There's a throne. And there's somebody on the throne. And the point is this. At the heart of the universe, there is an authority.

Somebody's in charge. And that's very reassuring. Very reassuring to know that behind our lives, which can be messy and very complex, there is a sovereign God who's in control.

And he's sitting on a throne. And not only is he in charge, but he's worthy to be in charge. He's not a despot. The hymns in the passage, we'll find as we go through it, tend to make explicit.

So if you look on your Bible where the stuff is indented there, it's like sort of full justified in these indentations there. The indented stuff is like songs or little hymns.

[9 : 12] And what these hymns do is they make explicit the stuff that the symbols sort of imply. And so the hymn, so the first hymn is sung by these four creatures who I think symbolically represent all created things.

So there's like the noblest. Traditionally, the noblest creature was the lion. And the strongest was the ox. And the wisest was the human. And the fastest was the eagle. So they represent all of the created things.

And so the created things sing. They make sort of explicit what is implied in the symbols. And here's what they say. They say, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.

So there is a throne. Somebody's in charge. And this person is worthy to be in charge. Holy, holy, holy. Holy, what does that mean? It means other. It means other. It means that God is not like us. But why three times? In English, we have different words to describe intensity. You know, like sad, sadder, saddest. But for the Bible writers, they don't have that.

[10:12] So what they do is they say the same word three times to describe various intensities. And three is like the most. So holy, holy, holy means the holiest.

So it's saying that the holiest thing in existence is this God who's sitting on the throne who's in charge. He's completely off our scales.

He's transcendentally, infinitely above us. He's not like anything we can imagine. So all we can say is holy, holy, holy.

And not just holy. He's holy, holy, holy is the Lord. But not just the Lord. The Lord God. But not just the Lord God. The Lord God Almighty.

So God is not like anything else. He is the boss's boss's boss. He's good. He is perfectly good. He is perfectly other. And he's on the throne at the center of the universe and he's in control.

[11:11] So creation sings first. And then we see the next song, the next hymn, is by these 24 elders who represent the people of God. And they sing a song as well.

And again, their song makes explicit what the symbols are trying to express. And they make the point again that God is worthy. But it's very interesting here to see that before they sing, what do we see?

We see that each of these elders has their own throne. So there's God's throne and then there's other thrones. And actually these elders all have crowns as well, which is very interesting, isn't it? To show us that God delegates his power.

But these folks, these elders, they cast their crowns down before they praise God. What does this mean? This is trying to show us that praise, there's no such thing as praise without consequences. It's not like, it's trying to say that praising God when we sing tonight, right? It's wonderful, wonderful hymns. It's not just an emotional act. And it's not just us having an ecstatic experience, like this wonderful emotional sort of experience.

[12:18] Praise and worship also means handing control of our lives over. You're not really worshipping unless you're kind of surrendering control. That's what it's trying to get at here.

So where are we? Okay, we're in the passage. What is it that John understands first? What is it John is shown first in picture, in vision, and in song?

There's someone in charge of the universe. That's it. There's someone in charge of the universe. God the creator. And it's, he's worthy to be there.

And folks, that should steady our nerve, shouldn't it? It should strengthen us against the ever-present temptation to nod off spiritually. So that's chapter four.

But this vision alone isn't enough. Let's look at the beginning of chapter five. So we've heard that there's a throne. And now we learn about a scroll.

[13:18] So the throne is not just a place of endless praise. And the world is not just a thing that God sits back and enjoys. The world creation, it's a project.

The world that we live in is actually going somewhere. There's this work to be done. In particular, a work that involves the rescue of creation from all of the projects which harm and pollute and poison God's good creation.

So there's work to be done, including the overthrowing of all the things that are sort of trying to destroy God's handiwork. That's God's plan, right? Is to renew creation, to restore creation, to make it all good again.

But it's complicated because of this fact. Is that the problems of the world, we can't put them at arm's length.

We're actually all implicated in the problems of the world, aren't we? The world has darkness in it. Because we are not God.

[14:22] We are not like God. We are not completely good. There is no health in us. We're not holy ourselves. We want to be the center of the universe. That's why there's problems in the world. So this is a big problem, of course, isn't it?

Cue the scroll. The scroll, what's that about? We'll come back to this idea here. Verse 1 of chapter 5 says that in God's right hand there's a scroll. It's like, you know, like an architect rolls up a design for a building.

It's kind of like that. God has a plan to put everything right, a plan to deal with the fact that the big problem is that humanity is disobedient.

And isn't that great? That God has a plan. That isn't sit off just being annoyed at everything going on.

God has a plan. And life is not random. But it can feel random. Nor is our lives controlled by things out of our...

[15 : 32] It's... How do I say this? The main players in our life we can sort of reduce sometimes to like, well, it's just our genetic code or it's just the market or it's just chance.

It's just luck. No. The past, the present, the future are controlled by God. God is sovereign. God has a plan. That's what's in the scroll.

So two points made so far. There is a throne. Somebody's sitting on it. It's God. He is worthy. That God has a plan. To renew the world.

To restore the world. To restore you. To renew you. But it's still not enough, these two things.

There's more. There's more to see. So we go from the throne to the scroll to the lamb.

Verse 2 of chapter 5. A challenge goes out to all of creation. You can see there. Who is worthy? So we have a plan. But who's going to initiate this plan? Who's going to make God's plan?

[16 : 32] Who's going to, you know, sort of make God's plan happen? Who's in charge of that? Who's going to manage that whole project right there? Who is worthy to un-open the scrolls? That's, isn't it interesting right there?

It doesn't say who is powerful enough to open the scrolls. Who is pretty enough? Who is rich enough? Who is clever enough to open the scrolls? It doesn't say that.

It says who is worthy enough. And the answer is no normal person. We're not worthy enough. We can't make God's plan happen.

I can't. Don't put me in charge of who's somebody's destiny. Don't put me in charge of passing judgment on somebody. My heart is just too compromised, as is yours.

We're not worthy to roll out God's plan. But there's a real massive dilemma here, though. Here's what the dilemma is.

[17 : 30] This is a slight excuses here. God, in Genesis 1 and 2, committed himself to working through obedient humankind. He goes, right, you know, I've got these commandments.

I'm going to, you know, I'm going to work with a human. I'm going to work with humans. They're going to, you know, through obedient humans. But we're not obedient. And God is holy. And he can't just ignore that commitment he made to work with humankind.

He can't just wave a magic wand and go, oh, it's all forgiven. Don't worry about it. I'll just make, you know, I'll make everything new. Forget about it. It's great. So here's the dilemma. God has bound himself to working with humanity, with humans, to solve a problem humans have made but can't get themselves out of.

That's a dilemma. Back to the vision. Again, we'll see what the solution to this is. Then the elder, an elder speaks and says to John, God has made a way through his Messiah, through his son, who became human for us.

So that's how God answers. That's how God deals with this dilemma. This is the solution. Now, to get into the solution a bit more, the Messiah, who was Jesus.

[18 : 46] Talks about the Messiah. Who was Jesus? This God-man. This God-man is described in very interesting ways. Verse 5, it says, what John hears is the announcement of a lion.

You see that? So John hears. The elder says, behold, there's a lion. John turns. Behold, what does he see? He sees a lamb. And in verse 6, it says, the lamb is between the throne and the living creatures.

But literally in the Greek, it's saying, the lamb is at the center of the center of the throne. So at the center of the center of the universe is a lamb.

John was expecting to see a lamb. John was expecting to see a lion. He sees a lamb. And those two are quite different things, aren't they? The lion, power and strength.

The lamb, vulnerability, weakness. At the center of the center of the universe, the being that will roll out God's plan is a lamb.

[19 : 54] What's that about? What it means is this. Is the victory won by the lion on the cross is accomplished through the sacrifice of the lamb.

We'll talk about this a bit more. Because this is part of the vision here that's probably the most pivotal for understanding the whole rest of the book. So I'll say it again. John hears about a lion. He's probably expecting to see a lion. He's probably expecting to turn around and maybe see a general or a warrior or a bear or something big and strong and stuff. He sees a lamb. And not just any lamb.

It says the lamb that was slain. Literally, it means a lamb that has been slaughtered. A slaughtered lamb is what he says. What does all this mean? Right. This is the heart of the gospel.

Here is God's plan. The lion doesn't win, doesn't restore humanity, doesn't renew humanity, doesn't buy forgiveness for us by being a lion.

[20 : 56] The lion doesn't win by being a lion. Which is what? The world looks to lions. We look to lions. I look to lions. You look to lions. Because we think, how do we solve problems?

Through strength and power and force. This is how we think life works. God's plan is to save us through weakness. Again, what is implied by the symbols and pictures is made more explicit in the worship and the songs.

This time, the four creatures and the elders come together. And it says they sing a new song. And it's called a new song because the lamb has created this new situation. And this is what they sing in verse 9.

Worthy are you to open the scroll. For by your blood you ransomed people for God. Okay, so this is explaining more how God restores us. How God renews us. And his plan for restoring the whole world.

For by your blood you ransomed the people of God. That's the song these folks sing. What does it mean? For by your blood you ransomed the people of God. The ransomed word in Greek, it's a slavery word.

[21 : 59] It means to rescue a slave that's been taken captive by somebody. And it implies that the rescue has come at a massive cost to you.

And this is, of course, talking about the cross. A price must be paid for all of the wrong in the world. But instead of us paying that price, God pays that price for us through Christ.

God wins through weakness by allowing himself to die. This is good news. And it does give us some indication of how precious you are to God.

That he would give up his own son for you all. And it tells us how terrible our sin is. Given the great cost it took to buy us back.

I don't know if you noticed this, but there was a worship crescendo in this passage. It built and built and built and built. The first song was sung by just the four living creatures.

[23 : 06] The next was sung by the elders. And the third, in verse 5, was sung by the four creatures and the elders. And the fourth, in verse 12, by the creatures and the elders. And all of a sudden, thousands of angels joined in.

And then the fifth, in verse 13, I'll read it to you. And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. And all that is in them saying to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb, be blessing and honor and glory forever and ever.

There is this crescendo of building up of worship. And I wonder if you also notice the difference of how the worship happens. The creatures at the beginning, with the eyes and the wings and stuff, they worship in their own way.

It's spontaneous praise for them. That's all they know. They have not forgotten that they were built for worship. The humans, the elders, though they have the advantage, they understand why they praise.

And we talked about this earlier. But you said in their songs, the little word for, F-O-R. Were there you for you created all things, it says. For you were slain. Creation as a whole just simply worships.

[24 : 12] But God's people, we understand why we worship, why we do it. We have the capacity to understand why we praise God. And Revelation has a lot more to say about this. But for now, we'll stop and just reflect for a moment.

Do we, and this is a challenge here, do we in our churchly life, in our regular life, in our daily life, do we give sufficient weight to praising God for who he is and for what he's done?

Do we know about Christ and God the creator? And do we know that to the point where we praise God for it?

Do we know that this is part of what it means to be human? That this is actually our vocation? To be human is to praise God, is to worship God. Because all creation is called to worship.

But we are called to worship with understanding. What an incredible gift that is. We're called to worship with our minds and with our hearts. And to recognize that he is worthy because he is creator and redeemer. And calls us to be priests in his kingdom, fellow workers.

[25 : 17] And the great plan, he is unrolling. Amen.