

“Before the Throne”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 10

Texts: Revelation 4:1-11; Isaiah 6:1-7

If the Book of Revelation has a single theme, then surely it is God and his greatness. This is clear in Revelation 4 and 5 where we are given a visionary glimpse of heaven. God is enthroned amidst the angelic hosts. His undescrivable glory fills the universe. He is worshiped with songs of praise, his creatures celebrating all that he has done. His rule has been established at creation and his mighty hand has guided the course of the history of redemption. But also prominent in the heavenly scene is the Lamb, who alone is worthy to open the scroll detailing the purposes of God for the future. Heaven itself resounds with praise “to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.”

We now come to a new section of the Apocalypse, Revelation 4-5, which includes John’s vision of the heavenly throne. Before we turn to our text (Revelation 4:1-11), we need to keep in mind the context of John’s vision of the heavenly scene as well as some of the distinctives of apocalyptic literature. In apocalyptic literature, the author uses symbolic language to paint word pictures describing spiritual realities which lie behind the events of the redemptive history. John does not intend us to understand the things he describes literally. The symbols he uses are drawn directly from the Old Testament and we are to interpret them in light of the broad panorama of redemptive history.

This means that the Book of Revelation is a kind of divine commentary upon the Old Testament showing how all that was foretold was, or will be, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain and upon whom the redemptive story is focused. The key to interpret the symbols in Revelation correctly, including the scene in heaven, is to observe how these symbols were used in the Old Testament and how they are now interpreted in the light of the coming of Christ.

In these two chapters of Revelation alone (4-5) there are fourteen elements drawn from Daniel 7 and the prophecy regarding the Son of Man and the Ancient of Days. There are also direct echoes here from Ezekiel 1-2, as well as that of Isaiah 6:1-7, our Old Testament lesson.¹ But John will now do what the Old Testament prophets could not. He will point us directly to the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the scroll which was sealed until the time of the end.

Through the use of apocalyptic imagery, John ties together a number of Old Testament themes, giving the church on earth, heaven’s perspective on Jesus’ words in the Lord’s Prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” In this scene we are given a glimpse of God’s will being done in heaven. Therefore, we may say that in these two chapters we are given a summary of history of redemption, viewed from a heavenly perspective.² Christ not only rules over his church, he rules over the entire cosmos. Before the redemptive drama reaches its conclusion, we know that the outcome is certain. Because God’s will *is* being done in heaven, we have every reason to believe that one day it will be done upon the earth, despite the apparent victory of the beast over the saints. “Thy will being done on earth” is exactly what God has promised and that for which Jesus has asked us to pray. In Revelation 4-5 we

¹ Beale, Revelation, 314-315.

² Poythress, Returning King, 97.

see God's will being done in heaven, giving us hope for what will one day be a reality upon the earth.

This is very significant, given the ground we have covered in the first three chapters of this book. The first three chapters of Revelation focused upon John's vision of the resurrected Christ as he walks in the midst of his churches, empowering them through the Holy Spirit to be witnesses of his grace and mercy to those around them. This became clear in the seven letters the Risen Christ addressed to the seven churches of western Asia Minor mentioned in Revelation 2-3. In each of these letters, Jesus knew the exact circumstances facing his people. He spoke words of encouragement to them. He promises blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. But these seven churches are also typological of Christ's church in every age, and so what Jesus says to these churches, he says to us as well. What he has promised to the seven churches, Christ has also promised to us.

In Revelation 3:21, Jesus promised the overcomers in Laodicea that one day they will sit with him upon his throne, ruling over the nations. This is important to God's people since many of these Christians faced persecution and death from the satanically-empowered beast who sought to force Christians to confess that Caesar was Lord. A number of people had lost their lives and livelihoods. Other Christians faced slander and persecution from those Jews who sought to stop these churches from preaching the gospel. Most of these congregations struggled with the question of how to remain faithful to Christ while living in the midst of pagan culture. Hard-pressed, hated and persecuted, and repeatedly tempted to compromise with the spirit of the age, the Christians in these seven churches are promised that if they overcome by remaining faithful to gospel, they will receive all of the blessings promised them by Christ.

Therefore, it is no accident that John's vision of heaven immediately follows upon the letters to the seven churches. The best way to encourage suffering and persecuted churches is to give them a glimpse of God's throne. A glimpse of God's power will give us courage to face the beast, for the final victory is certain and the beast will be defeated. A glimpse of heaven reminds us of God's goodness and justice, reinforcing the promise that righteousness will triumph and the wicked will be punished. A glimpse of the Lamb who was slain, reminds us as God's people that our redemption is an accomplished fact in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This heavenly vision reminds the saints that in the midst of their trials, their suffering, and in their temptation, God sovereignly controls all things. And one day, God's will, which is now being done in heaven, will indeed be done upon the earth.³

One final note of introduction needs to be mentioned before we turn to our text. In the second commandment we are told that we must worship God only as he commands. Therefore, it should be obvious that when we come to a passage such as this which describes the worship of God which takes place at this very moment in heaven, we should be looking for patterns in the worship depicted in this heavenly scene so that we might pattern our Lord's Day worship after that which transpires in heaven. There is even a sense when we as the people of God gather together on the Lord's day to worship the one who sits upon the throne and the Lamb, we add our worship to that which presently takes place in heaven. At the very least our worship here on earth should prepare us to worship in heaven, for one day we will all take our places among the multitude who surround the glassy sea and add our voices to the heavenly choir. Worship is not only one of the great joys of the Christian life, it is serious business.

³ Poythress, Returning King, 97.

With this brief bit of background, let now turn to our text, Revelation 4:1-11.

In Revelation 4:1, we hear words from John which echo earlier words from the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel when they too were given glimpses of this heaven scene. Says John: *“After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven.”* John uses the phrase, *“after this,”* or *“after these things,”* which gives us an important clue about what is to follow. *“After this,”* should be understood to mean that the vision which follows, was revealed to John after the vision recorded in Revelation 1-3. This does not necessarily mean that the events of this vision are to occur in history after the events in Revelation 1-3. There is a much overlap between John’s vision of the resurrected Christ and the letters to the seven churches with that of the worship described in Revelation 4-5. In Revelation 1-3, Jesus speaks to the seven churches which are symbolic of the church militant during the last days, which encompass that period of time between our Lord’s first advent and his second coming. But in Revelation 4-5, John is describing the same period of time from the vantage point of God’s throne in heaven.

The first thing we should note is that the image of an open door tells us that John is being permitted to see things otherwise barred from human sight.⁴ John has already heard Christ’s voice in Revelation 1:12, now he hears it again. *“And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’”* John is now given a vision of the last days from the perspective of heaven, whereas the earlier vision had been given from the perspective of Christ’s presence with his churches.⁵ Like the prophet Ezekiel who was repeatedly raptured by the Spirit so as to see heavenly things, says John, *“At once I was in the Spirit.”* Through the Holy Spirit, John is given a vision of the heavenly scene, which is, as one writer puts it, *“a timeless dimension where truth and reality can be clearly discerned.”*⁶ And like the prophets before him, this vision constitutes John as a prophetic messenger of what he sees. He is given this vision so that he might now proclaim what he sees to Christ’s church.

When our dispensational friends tell us that in this verse John is describing the rapture of all Christians off the earth, and that the rest of the Book of Revelation concerns the supposed seven-year tribulation, they are sadly mistaken. This verse has nothing whatsoever to do with the rapture. Rather it has to do with John’s being caught-up into heaven to describe what follows.

Like the prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah and Daniel, John is granted sight of things about which we can but imagine, namely the throne of God. According to John, *“there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.”* It is vital to notice that John never attempts to describe God, only the divine glory and the creatures who surround him. God is Spirit. Elsewhere he is described as a consuming fire who dwells in unapproachable light and glory. Thus John describes the scene around the throne and the creatures who attend the one who sits there, but he does not describe God, only his glory. *“And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.”* The precious gems refract light in almost all the shades of the color spectrum pointing to God’s undescrivable glory, while the rainbow recalls to mind God’s covenant oath and faithfulness in

⁴ Kistemaker, Revelation, 183

⁵ Beale, Revelation, 317-318.

⁶ Beale, Revelation, 319.

providing for the salvation of his people. As the rainbow was the sign of the new creation after Noah's deliverance from the flood, so too the presence of the rainbow in heaven directs our gaze to the new creation which began with the resurrection of Christ and which one day will be God's will on earth.

In verse 4, John now turns his focus away from God's glory to the creatures who attend the divine throne. *"Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads."* The identification of these beings is the subject of much debate. The number of them, twenty-four, certainly points us to the church in both testaments, the twelve tribes in the Old Testament and the twelve apostles in the New. Given their function before the throne, these elders are probably angelic beings who are the heavenly representatives of God's people in both the Old and New Testaments.⁷ While the earlier vision in Revelation 1-3 viewed the church in light of its earthly struggles, this vision views the church in light of its heavenly identity. If the elders depicted here are indeed connected to the angels of the seven churches, this should remind us that the church on earth must find its true identity in heaven, where God and the Lamb are worshiped in Spirit and in truth. Therefore, what is done on earth in the churches must be conducted in the light of what is even now being done in heaven.

God's glory in heaven is accompanied by the phenomena associated with God's judgment and presence found on earth throughout redemptive history. According to John, *"From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder."* Since these same phenomena repeatedly appear at key moments in the biblical drama, it is not accidental then that they will appear again in the Book of Revelation at the conclusion of the seven judgments yet to be revealed. The presence of lightening and thunder reminds God's people that God has not forgotten them in the midst of their earthly struggles.⁸ But this is not all John sees. *"Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God."* Drawing upon the visions of Zechariah and Ezekiel connecting lamps with the Spirit of YHWH and with the Spirit of Christ present with his churches in Revelation 1, this is clearly a reference to the seven-fold fullness of the blessed Holy Spirit.⁹

And there is more. *"Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal."* This scene certainly echoes Exodus 24, when Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, went up on the Mount of Sinai and saw God, and then reported that under his feet they saw a pavement of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. This may also refer to a transparent pavement which surrounds the throne. But one thing is certain. The heavenly sea is tranquil, like glass. The seas of earth are the frequently the scene of storm and tempest. The sea is also depicted in Revelation as the place of chaos and rebellion, from which the beast emerges to wage war upon the saints as we read in Revelation 11:7 and 13:1. But in heaven, the sea is calm, like glass, clear as crystal. There is no storm or tempest here, only calm and peace.¹⁰

Not only does John see twenty-four elders, like Isaiah, he sees other creatures who attend the one who sits upon the throne. *"In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were*

⁷ Beale, Revelation, 322.

⁸ Beale, Revelation, 326-327.

⁹ Poythress, Returning King, 104.

¹⁰ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 99.

covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings.” Similar creatures were seen by Ezekiel in his vision of God’s throne as he reports in the first chapter of his prophecy. These creatures were also seen by Isaiah, who tells us, *“I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’*” Such an amazing sight overwhelms Isaiah with a sense of his own sinfulness.

Throughout the book of Revelation, numbers are always used symbolically. The number four is used throughout the apocalypse as the number of the world, since the earth is said to have four corners (north, south, east and west), four winds, and is divided into four regions; earth, sea, rivers and springs, and the heavens.¹¹ Therefore, when John sees *four* living creatures, they represent the entire created order. This is why they are depicted as looking like the earth’s great creatures, man, the lion, the ox and the eagle. But given their function as part of the royal entourage surrounding the throne who continually worship the one seated there, and given the fact that they are covered with eyes which see everything, these creatures serve as the royal guardians who keep God’s heavens from being defiled. They not only worship God and the Lamb in heaven, they also execute God’s judgments upon the earth.¹²

In fact, in Revelation chapter 6, we learn that these same living creatures will go forth to bring judgment upon the earth when the first four seals of judgment are opened. But in Revelation 4, John describes their function in worship, *“day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’”* The heavenly hymns they sing remind us that God is holy, that he is triune (hence, the three-fold repetition “holy, holy, holy”) that he is eternal (without beginning and end) and that he is sovereign (he is the Almighty). Given these glorious attributes and Tri-unity of God, he alone is worthy of praise. And he has been from all eternity.

Furthermore, when these living creatures praise God, they represent the whole of creation praising the creator. And when they worship—as they have from all eternity—the twenty-four elders join them. The picture we are to draw from this that all creation (represented by the four living creatures) as well as all of God’s redeemed people (represented by the twenty-four elders) worship the one who is alone worthy of our worship. John describes this scene for us in verses 9-11. *“Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’”* This not only reminds us of God’s unspeakable greatness, but the heavenly scene should become the pattern for all Christian worship on earth.

Given this amazing scene, there is much here for us in terms of application. For those persecuted and struggling churches of Asia Minor, such a scene would not only have

¹¹ Bauckham, Climax of Prophecy, 31.

¹² See Beale, Revelation, 328-331; Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 101.

given them great encouragement in the face of their struggles, John's vision of God's throne will confirm for them that God's will *is being done* on heaven, even while Satan wages war upon them while they live upon the earth. Not only does this point us ahead to a time when God's will **will** be done upon the earth, this scene confirms the blessed state awaiting all those who die in Christ. Therefore, when the beast puts one of God's saints to death, that saint comes to life and they reign with Christ. And now having been given a glimpse of the heavenly throne, the persecuted saints on earth know what awaits them in heaven when they die. But not only does this scene give comfort to Christians facing death as the hands of the beast, it should give comfort to all of us who have stood beside the graves of those we love. For all those who die in Christ—including all those who we have loved and who precede us in death—have taken their places before the throne, adding their voices to those of the heavenly choir. They have come to life and now reign with Christ for a thousand years, as they await the great and glorious day of the resurrection.

This heavenly scene should inform our understanding of worship. Any worship that is truly Christian must be directed toward God, since he alone is worthy of our worship. Any other conception of worship is intrinsically idolatrous. What this means for us is simply this: God is the audience of our worship, since he blesses us through a divine visitation through word and sacrament. Indeed, our worship is directed to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb who walks in our midst. Therefore, the congregation as a whole assembles for the purpose of worshipping God in heaven. We do not come here this morning to watch what goes on in the front of the church or to listen to the choir. We come here to add our voices to those of the elders, the angels, the four living creatures and multitude of departed saints who worship God in heaven at this very moment.

This is why Christians from the very beginning have used a liturgy similar to the historic Protestant liturgy we use each Lord's Day. We hear God's word of greeting. We sing his praises and come into his very presence. We pray as Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer. We confess our sins and hear Christ's word of forgiveness so that we worship without guilt or fear. We confess our faith in the words of the creed, a testimony to those around us of the worthiness of the one who sits on the throne and of the Lamb. And then God replies to us, speaking to us in his word, and confirming to us his promises in the sacraments.

This eliminates any type of so-called worship which is designed to entertain the congregation or which is designed to meet the felt-needs of so-called seekers, people who are really sinful idolaters who need to be told how God wishes to be worshiped. Therefore, we do not do what we like in worship—we worship as God directs us to worship, especially in light of what we find in passages such as this one. This is why worship is such serious business and why we must not view the assembly of the saints on the Lord's day like going to a Laker game or a concert or a movie. People arrive before the first quarter is over. People leave early to beat the crowd. People get up and wander around and chat with their friends. But this is not appropriate during worship when God is our audience and visitor and when he is speaking to us. The criterion for worship is not whether the pastor was funny, the band was great, or whether or not we received a blessing. The only acceptable criterion is whether or not God received the blessing of his people in accordance with his word. This is why we must give due preparation and due attention to what transpires in this place on the Lord's Day. When we come here, we enter into God's presence and the perspective is not that things earthly, but things heavenly.

Even a glimpse of the heavenly throne reminds us of what Calvin described as the greatest of Christian privileges, to enter the presence of God and be numbered among the assembly of those who are allowed to worship the creator of the world and the redeemer of the saints. Let us never forget that God could have left each one of us in darkness and bondage to sin. If he had done so the only time we would enter

his presence would be to hear the words, “depart from me, I never knew you.” But this not the case for all those in Christ. God has chosen us despite our unworthiness. He has sent Christ to die for our sins and raised him from the dead for our justification. He has called us to faith through the preaching of the gospel and he has confirmed those promises through the sacraments. And he has done all of this so that we might be numbered among the assembly of those who enter his presence on the Lord’s Day and add our voices to the heavenly choir, singing praises to the one who sits and the throne and to the lamb.

And with them we sing, “*You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory, honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.*” For once we have been given a glimpse God’s throne in heaven and realize that this is the end to which we have been called, how can we not help but fall before the throne and worship the one seated there and the Lamb? Amen!