



Sunday, January 14, 2024
Revelation 4

Last fall we embarked on an epic journey through the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ asking the question, ‘What does this book say to us about Discipleship?’

You see, oftentimes, this book is only read or studied to try and figure out either, when Jesus is coming back, what is the mark of the beast and who is the Antichrist and will we have to suffer through the tribulation or get to escape it? And whereas these are all valuable questions, this book actually serves a greater purpose, which is to reveal the nature of Jesus Christ in all of His fullness. After all, the book is literally called the Revelation of Jesus Christ. And as we learned last fall, this word revelation is the Greek word, ‘apokalypsis’ which essentially means, ‘that which was once hidden, is now revealed but always has been.’ So, in the case of the disciples, they saw Jesus as the suffering saint and the sacrificial Lamb as His purpose was to sacrifice Himself on the cross to save us from our sins. Now, we see in the first chapter, a depiction of Jesus like we have never seen before - now as the ultimate warrior Jesus. But this is not new information. Jesus has always been the sacrificial lamb AND the ultimate warrior, but up until this point, he just had not revealed Himself as such.

We also learned that the Book of Revelation can be viewed as a great play or theatrical presentation of sorts. There are many different scenes, many different actors and actresses, many different plot twists, and storylines that make reading this book similar to taking a script out of a very wild Shakespearean play. And plays are typically broken up into sections, called acts. So chapters 1 to 3 were essentially act one and now as we head into chapters 4 and 5, they are viewed as the second act of this great play.

Act 1 focuses on the depiction of Jesus Christ now as warrior and ruler with a message to the 7 churches (the church) to keep on standing firm for Him.

As we step into the beginning of the second act, we see a scene change and new characters begin to emerge. John, who is still on the physical island of Patmos, likely imprisoned there because he would not worship Caesar as God, now in his vision, sees an open door before him, and is given a glimpse into the heavenly realm. We are now introduced to God on the throne, surrounded by 24 elders and 4 strange all-seeing creatures.

Revelation 4:1-11 (NKJV)

‘After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, “Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this.”

2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. 3 And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. 4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. 5 And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

6 Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. 7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf (ox), the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle. 8 The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying:

*“Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!”*

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

*11 “You are worthy, O Lord,
To receive glory and honor and power;*

*For You created all things,
And by Your will they exist and were created.”*

John opens up this descriptive journey by introducing us to a doorway to Heaven. This isn't the first time we've encountered a doorway in the book of Revelation though. In the message to the church in Philadelphia Jesus tells them that there is an open door before them that no man can shut. And if we go back to the Gospel of John we read that Jesus is the door and those who enter in will find salvation. So the symbolism of the door in chapter 4 is significant because in all three of these examples, the door represents the authority of Jesus. That He has all authority unto salvation. That He has all authority to give you purpose and mission and that He has all authority to reveal to us the mysteries of Heaven. And so - what He is about to show John - He realizes that he will not be able to comprehend it but the symbol of the doorway stands as a reminder that even though it won't make much sense, what he is entering into is indeed under the authority and full control of Almighty God.

First things first, John sees an out of this world ornate throne room with God sitting on the throne which acts as a symbol of His ultimate power, sovereignty and authority to rule. This image is significant because it serves as a prophetic reminder that as this book unfolds and things start to look ugly and perhaps even worrisome, especially in the context of the trials, tribulations, and the cosmic battles depicted later on, God is still on the throne. That no matter how bad or ugly things become, He still holds all power and all authority.

The depiction of God here is also significant as He didn't look like Moses here with flowing beard and hair, staff in hand, adorned with leather sandals. No, the image of God that we've come to embrace is not in fact represented here at all. John describes the presence of God here not so much as a person but more-so as an energy-force that reminded him of precious stones like Jasper and Sardius and even Emerald. Much has been said about these three elements and whether or not each are significant to the picture but my thinking is that the significance lies, not in the type or colour of the gemstone specifically, but in the fact that the best that John can do is compare God's brilliance to the most beautiful and dazzling of gemstones. He's not the only one to do this either. The Psalmist - David did the same in Psalm 104 by saying that God was dressed in a robe of Light that stretched to the heavens. It's also similar to how Ezekiel described the image of God in his vision when he used the likeness of Sapphire and Amber. And then if we go all the way back to Exodus, when God confirmed His covenant with the people of Israel, Moses also described God's glorious appearance by using gemstones:

Exodus 24:9-10

'Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, 10 and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity.'

The use of precious stones to describe God's appearance is symbolic and not meant to be a literal physical description. In apocalyptic literature like this, such imagery is used to convey truths about God's nature and character in a way that is awe-inspiring and beyond normal human experience. These images are meant to evoke a sense of majesty, beauty, and awe in the reader, pointing to aspects of God that are otherwise indescribable in human language.

As we move forward in the vision, we notice that God is not alone. All around Him were another 24 thrones and these were inhabited by 24 elders - which again is an interesting detail. We don't often see the number 24 represented in Scripture but it is significant here because this represents the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the 12 disciples in the New Testament. Collectively - the patriarchs and forefathers of the church. And the combination of these two groups symbolizes the entirety of God's people from before the cross, to after the cross - now sitting together as a divine council of sorts as they share in elements of leadership and authority as given to them by God, Himself.

Next we see the seven lamps of fire, burning before the throne. This is interesting, because in John's first vision, we see that there are seven lampstands which represented the seven churches that Jesus had specific messages for. At first glance it could seem that the lampstands in Revelation 1 and lamps in Revelation 4 are the same but upon further examination I don't think so because John specifically says that the lamps of fire are the seven Spirits of God and the lampstands are the seven churches. I do believe that they are connected though. The term Spirit here is capitalized which means that we are talking about the Holy Spirit but there is only one Holy Spirit so why does John mention seven? First off, it's important to understand that, especially in the New Testament fire was often used to show the presence of the Holy Spirit. And in Acts 2, we see tongues like fire, when the presence of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the people in the upper room. This was the Holy Spirit, but there were multiple tongues of fire that displayed His presence that day - similar to the multiple (7) lamps of fire displaying His presence in John's vision. Again, in apocalyptic literature, details are often used liberally to denote specific significances. In this case, I think the number seven is used to directly connect these lamps back to the seven lampstands of chapter 1:

As the fire of the Holy Spirit is the fire source that they need to be able to burn bright for the Lord by being steadfast and obedient. afterall, what good is a lampstand with fire?

The number 7 also the number of completeness. That this fire source is not just any kind of fire, it is a source that is perfectly complete. It is the source from which the lampstands will be able to continue to burn bright and be the empowered churches that Jesus is calling them to be in Revelation 2-3.

This whole scene now is underscored by this incredible sea of glass-like crystal that John describes as being set directly in front of the throne. Which is an interesting observation because all throughout the Bible we see that water is used for its cleansing properties and even in the Book of 1 Kings where Solomon is building his temple, he includes a 'massive sea-like bronze pool' in front of the temple containing over 2000 baths which was used ceremonially as a cleansing and purification pool. In a similar manner, the sea of crystal clear glass set before the Throne could then represent the ultimate purity and perfection of God's presence. The bronze sea in Solomon's temple was only a taste of the purity of God's presence that was unachievable on earth.

Next we see four living creatures filled with eyes in the front and back, some of whom had faces of a lion, man, ox or eagle which is just plain weird to picture. Especially the man, one. But, because it's four specific faces, there must be some significance to that. Theologians have philosophized about these at great length and tend to land on the notion that these four different faces likely symbolize four specific natures of Christ:

Lion: power and authority

Ox: servanthood and sacrifice

Man: Incarnation. Jesus was fully God and fully Human

Eagle: most majestic of all birds, symbolizing the divine nature of God.

However, there is another thought that relates to creation and seems to be more in harmony with the picture that is being painted. You see, four is a significant number in creation: four corners of the earth (north, east, south, west), four seasons (spring, summer, fall and winter), four elements (earth, fire, water, air)...etc. In 300AD, there was a Rabbi named Abihu who connected these four creatures to creation by saying that:

'...there are four mighty creatures. The mightiest among the birds is the eagle, the mightiest among domestic animals is the ox, the mightiest among the wild animals is the lion, [and according to the creation story] the mightiest of them all is man; and God has taken all of creation, and secured them to his throne.'

Rabbi Abihu

300AD

And so this thought suggests that the four living creatures likely represent the whole of creation made by God, in worship FOR God.

John now goes on to describe that they each had six wings and interestingly mentions again, the fact that these four creatures are literally covered front to back, top to bottom with eyes. I'm not sure why this is the case exactly, but one reason that theologians suggest is that this would have brought further credibility to the visions that both Isaiah and Ezekiel had witnessed centuries ago as these same four creatures filled with eyes were now appearing to John as well. Ezekiel described these four beings in a much more descriptive manner though. And just like John in Revelation, he does his best to try and describe in the natural what was taking place in the supernatural but ultimately leaves its reader, you and me, scratching our heads as to what these creatures actually looked like.

For years, artists and designers have been trying to grapple with what this throne-room scene and what these beings looked like and if you do a quick Google search, you will find many 'interesting' pictures.

They are all using the natural to try and describe the supernatural which will simply never do it justice. So, it ends up being very weird....strange....

Natural vs. Supernatural. Can't cohesively explain one using the other.

Example: Watching a 3-D movie without the glasses doesn't work.

Now, this is all interesting information and it is important that we walk through the descriptions that John gives us, but there is one other thing in this text that I think helps moves it from simply a descriptive text to an empowering one and that is that this chapter is ultimately a simple yet profound call to worship.

The 24 elders....the 4 creatures....all of creation doing one thing. Declaring the glory and power and Lordship of God.

Worship is a major theme of the whole Bible. Creation knows there is a Creator, and creation knows its Creator to be all together praise-worthy. Which is why Jesus said to those on Palm Sunday who wanted the children to stop singing, "if these become silent, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40). By saying this, Jesus was referencing the larger picture of the point of all of creation being meant to worship God as is pictured here in Revelation 4, and if you try and silence one form of creation's worship, another form will rise up to declare the same thing. Because as David says in Psalm 19,

all of creation declares the glory of God. You can't stop it - because that's why creation exists! It speaks to His handiwork in all things.

Ultimately, Revelation 4 gives us a powerful picture of worship. This is that one area in our lives that defies the laws of natural versus supernatural. We don't need to fully understand the ins and outs of everything that happens in the supernatural realm as a precursor for us to then being able to worship God. Worship of God cannot be viewed as a response to our level of understanding. If that were the case, then my worship would be very quiet.

Day and night, night and day, these creatures, in heaven, worship God, because that's what creation is designed to do. All of creation reflects the glory of God. That's what worship is. When we look at worship, however, we tend to make it circumstantial. If good things happen, then we worship God accordingly. If bad things happen, then we don't worship God accordingly. Well, the apostle Paul threw that out of the water when he was stuck in prison and decided that he was going to worship God anyways, and as he did, the walls fell down. He had no idea that was going to happen when he started and so his worship wasn't, controlled or manipulated by the thought that if I do this, then that will happen. That's not worship. He didn't know or understand, or comprehend what was going on, but that did not stop his worship. This is the power of worship, especially when it goes beyond favourable circumstances and situations.

This is responsive behaviour, but worship is not relegated to a response. The ancient armies of Israel would often lead their battles with the worshippers as an act of declaring their full reliance on God for the victory.

What could it look like if our worship wasn't reactive, based on our circumstances, but proactive, regardless of the circumstances.

I don't think we recognize just how powerful worship really is. We need to embrace worship. We need to cultivate lives of worship.

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