

Sermon – 26/10/2003 am

Throne in Heaven

Study Text: Revelation 4

In 1961 Yuri Gagarin went into space and orbited the earth – the first man to do so. You may remember what he said when he landed back in communist Russia – ‘I did not see God up there’. His blasphemous words created quite a stir at the time but today few would blink. Such words reflect what many think – I see no God so there is no God. Such is our attachment to humanistic and materialistic thinking that even Christians are confused and some have abandoned belief in heaven and hell.

But remember what Paul said to the pagans there in Athens – *God is not far from each one of us* (Acts 17:27). Paul could see beyond the seen to the unseen world through eyes of faith. He did not have to go searching for God in outer space.

The trouble with man is that he puts himself at the centre of the world. This is the very nature of sin of course. We see it in the child and we see it in ourselves – everything in the world revolves around me.

The picture we see in this text today is very different. What do we notice? God is in the centre of the whole universe. His throne is surrounded by heavenly beings, elders, angels and all creatures in heaven, on earth, and under the earth (5:13). God is in the centre and he is in control.

The picture related to us in this chapter is a vision which the Lord gave to John – most scholars think this is John the apostle. It is a vision of true reality – a paradox maybe – but what we see on earth is not true reality. What we see with these eyes is passing away. What is not seen is eternal (II Corinthians 4:18).

The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave – so begins this last book of the Bible. The word ‘revelation’ translates the Greek word *apocalypsis*. In books and movies we see the transliteration as in ‘Apocalypse now’.

This vision then is part of the revelation of Jesus Christ, given in a vision to John, for him to send to the seven churches in Asia – what is today western Turkey. The Christians there were like you and me except they were facing severe persecution. The emperor Domitian who ruled the vast empire from his throne in Rome from 81-96 AD, made claims to divinity. He took the titles ‘lord’ and ‘god’ so history tells us. So Christians worshipping only Jesus as Lord and God were not tolerated. Already the faithful witness Antipas had been martyred in Pergamos. Others were told they would have tribulation and to be *faithful unto death – and I will give you the crown of life* (2:10).

Is such a situation difficult for you to imagine today – a king claiming divinity and persecuting Christians? Maybe we forget too quickly people like Hitler; and Emperor Hirohito of Japan who until Jan 1, 1946, claimed to be divine. Christians suffered terribly under his rule. How would you live under such persecution? How do you live under the pressure of materialism and wickedness around you today – the pressure to conform to the world, to compromise in your exclusive worship of Jesus?

In this vision the Lord opened John’s spiritual eyes to see wonders in the spiritual realm just like Ezekiel and even Paul (though he could not relate his vision – II Corinthians 12). Jesus called to John from above saying *come up here and I will show you things that must take place after this*.

Throne

John saw into the throne room of heaven. The door was standing open. He saw the one sitting on the throne in indescribable glory and majesty. He saw the one who rules in heaven and on earth; who lives and rules for ever and ever, from eternity to eternity.

The one sitting on the throne could not be described. This accords with the second commandment – God cannot be represented by anything in heaven above, or the earth beneath or anything under the earth (Exodus 20:4). All John could see was the dazzling radiance surrounding the throne. Like the radiance of precious stones – diamonds and carnelian.

We once visited the palace of a raja or king in India. Even the doors to the throne room were covered in gold and studded with diamonds and precious stones. Well they once were. The raja had long since died and the precious stones had all been taken by a conquering king. Such is the future for all the thrones of men.

And around the throne in heaven like a halo was a rainbow – in appearance like an emerald. This reminds us of the rainbow sign that God gave Noah – a sign of his mercy and faithfulness towards creation. *Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life* (Genesis 9). And then we note the glassy sea in vs. 6. What brilliance reflected from this peaceful, glassy sea, like and expanse beneath the throne in Ezekiel 1.

This majestic throne of the triune God is at the centre of the universe. In the next chapter we see the slain Lamb, Jesus Christ who *has conquered*, in the midst of the throne. The one on the throne is in complete control over all things in heaven and on earth. We are to have this world view. We are to see everything from this heavenly perspective. Nothing in this world happens outside the rule from this transcendent throne in heaven. No emperor or king on the earth has power or authority above what is allowed from this throne in heaven.

In the vision we see lightning, thunder and rumblings coming from the throne. This is reminiscent of when the Israelites gathered at Mt Sinai and God came down upon that mountain and spoke to them (Exodus 19). We see seven lamps of fire before the throne. Judgment comes from this throne.

The following chapters of this book tell about 7 seals, 7 trumpets, and 7 bowls of God wrath being poured out – 7 being a symbolic number for completeness. In fact the very picture of lightning, thunder, earthquake and hail re-occurs in the vision after the seventh seal (8:5), the seventh trumpet (11:19) and the seventh bowl (16:18). You see there is some structure to Revelation – we just have to spend a bit of time searching.

God is already judging the world in these ‘last days’ but times of tribulation lie ahead. At the end of the age Jesus will return victorious and all will be called to give account before this heavenly throne. His victory was obtained at the Cross but the full ramifications of this victory are yet to be seen in the world.

Worship

The vision goes on to reveal worship being given around the throne in heaven. The one upon the throne is worthy of all worship – and he alone is worthy. He is worthy to receive all the glory, all the honour, and all the power.

Closest to the throne-*in the midst of the throne and around the throne* – are **4 living ones**. These resemble the ‘cherubim’ seen in Ezekiel’s vision. There they supported the throne of God. Here in Revelation they are stationed on the four sides of the throne, ready to go to the four corners of the earth to serve God. They have eyes all over, watching with vigilance, like guardians of the throne. Eyes symbolise knowledge. They

have faces like a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. These are usually interpreted as representing animate creation in the aspects of nobility, strength, wisdom and speed.

The living ones give glory, honour and thanks to the one sitting on the throne. They are seen worshipping in words similar to the seraphim of Isaiah 6:2 – *Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!*

In a circle further out from the throne are 24 thrones occupied by **24 elders** (4:4). They were robed in white, having been cleansed in the blood of Christ, and they had gold crowns of victory on their heads. Why 24? Probably the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the New Testament. They represent the redeemed, triumphant people of God.

Like the living ones they also were engaged in worship day and night- they were fully occupied in worship. They took their cue from the living ones. When the living ones gave praise the elders fell down before the one sitting on the throne, took off their crowns and praised God saying – *You are worthy O Lord, to receive glory, honour and power, for you created all things, and by you will they exist and were created.*

They worshipped God because he created all things. His is the mind and hand behind all that exists. How worthy of praise – of continuous praise day and night!

Do you look forward to joining in that heavenly praise and worship? If you think God is worthy of such worship why should it be different now? Is it the greatest desire of your heart to give all glory and honour and thanks to God – now?

Our worship here on earth is but an extension of this worship in heaven. We are in effect part of that heavenly throng worshipping God. In Christ Jesus you are seated with God in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6) – yes now- yes you who have been saved by grace through faith.

See Hebrews 12:22 – *You **have come** to the city of the living God, to a great company of angels, to the general assembly of the firstborn, to God the judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus.*

Do you sometimes get discouraged when you see so few worshipping Jesus here with you? You see friends going off to the movies, to the beach, or to the football, as you come to church. That is exactly what was happening to the first readers of this letter there in Asia. Friends were going the way of the world – worshipping worldly things or people.

This letter was a call to them to persevere in the faith. This picture of the throne in heaven is a picture of true reality. It was a given to encourage them to be faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ to the very end. Long after the movie is over and the full time whistle has blown at the footy, will you be still worshipping your Creator God and Redeemer Jesus Christ?

Worthy is the Lamb, to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing. Amen.

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