

Things are not what they seem

Glimpses from Revelation

The Lamb among the Nations (a)

Revelation 4:1—5:14

Overview

We turn from the church scene in vision one to the world scene—vision two (chs. 4—7). As with vision one, it starts with God and his Christ (this study), and moves to the actions that follow that (next study). Before God reveals to us the *events* that will take place, he tells us about *himself*, and he begins with two doctrines we find hardest to understand—creation and redemption. Or, we may say, ‘That God is’ and ‘That he is good.’ In both instances, we are shown that when confronted with the reality of God creating and Christ redeeming, creatures acknowledge that God and Christ are worthy (4:11; 5:9, 12-13), worthy, that is, to be in charge of our world and our future.

The contested doctrine in the West today is the doctrine of God. We have seen him written out of public life and out of existence by many. As always, where the church is not vigilant, it can follow the world and, in practice, write God out of our ecclesial life as well. We need to see the Lord ‘high and lifted up’ (Isa. 6:1).

Grace and greatness

What John describes here, ‘the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come’ (v. 8), with ‘the seven Spirits of God’ before him (v. 5), he has already used in abbreviated form in his introduction: he said ‘Grace to you and peace, from him who is and who was and who is to come, and the seven Spirits who are before his throne’ (1:4 with 4:5, 8). Here is why he can call for grace and peace for us—because of the greatness of the God who gives them.

The vision and the worship

In days when the church can expect to feel the anger of man (an attempt to be the ‘big’ person in our lives), we need to be rooted in awe of God.

The aura

God is radiant and surrounded with beauty. John seems to have noticed the similarity of what he sees with what Daniel saw (Dan. 7) and records his vision with the same phrasing. God himself can only be described in terms of precious stones. Around him is an emerald-like rainbow. Does John have colour in mind or the covenant rainbow? Whatever, it is stunning. Further out is a sea of glass. Glass gives a sense of space (so say house designers) and we have a crystal-like sea of it.

In this case, prepositions: ‘around’, ‘out from’ or ‘in the centre of’, suggest the environs are generated by God rather than enhance his throne.

The authority

God is on a throne, having, not ceremonial but legislative, executive and judicial authority. The scene is like a violent thunderstorm. His seven fold Spirit shines with witness to the creation.

The company

God is King of kings, but 24 elders are present with him and have authority under him. This may suggest the Old and New Testament people of God, or the 24 orders of priests who served in the temple. God has always sought a people who will share with him in the coming of the kingdom.

Great angelic figures (seraphim in Isaiah 6), in and around the throne, are so full of eyes that they miss nothing. They have all the greatness of noble creatures and lead the worship. Well may we say, 'Angels help us to adore him!'

The worship

The majestic creatures recognise God's **holiness**—they use a (Hebrew) superlative triple cry. In one sense, holiness is God's difference from us. Holiness is his 'godness', something we can never be. It is his purity—he is totally unmixed with anything that is not himself. As such, his holiness is powerful and fearful.

But then, we are created in his image and cannot do other than recognise the rightness of him being what he is, and be shamed by not being like that. Wonderfully, God provides for us to share his holiness. In fact, it is a term of relationship—'holy to the Lord'. Our holiness means, first of all, to belong to the Lord, and so, to be like him. The elders are clothed in white clothes (cf. 3:4-5; 7:14). But we dare not lose the sense of his holiness as the source of all power and goodness.

Harold Berman (a former Harvard Law School professor) writes: 'People will desert institutions that do not seem to them to correspond to some transcendent reality in which they believe — believe *in* with their whole beings, and not just believe *about*, with their minds' (Quoted in Mark W Janis, *Natural Law, Religion and the Development of International Law* (1999), p. 169).

The majestic creatures know his total **power** (lit. 'all power'). Western nations have won a form of government that limits concentrations of power and this has arisen in a context where there was a greater power to fear—God. William Penn (d. 1718) famously said, 'Those who will not be governed by God will be ruled by tyrants'. It is an inestimable privilege to know the seat of ultimate authority.

They understand his **eternity**. 'All time is embraced in God's eternal presence' (so Mounce; cf. Exod. 3:14-15). He creates time for us but not so that we do not have some understanding that there is something greater than this. He has 'put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end' (Eccles. 3:11). Tremper Longman III says this sense of eternity is 'an impulse to press beyond the limits which the present world circumscribes about man in order to escape the bondage which holds him in the incessant cycle of the seasons and in order to console his anxious mind with meaning and purpose'. We cannot fathom what it may mean to be eternal, but already, we have been given eternal life and can do eternal things. We know God is eternal, and will finally share an eternal future—more a quality than a mere quantity (John 17:3).

Then, the elders are made bold to speak on behalf of all creation, recognizing their **Creator**. We know that *we*, and all things, exist, but here, worship grasps the one whose will and work have made all things to exist. Creation alone is given as the reason for their worship. Apart from this, some sense that *we* are the origin and measure of all things floods in. Rather, it is a never-ending source of wonder to know that the world, in all its immensity and variety, is made, and then, to know the one who has made it. Here, the elders cast their rightly worn crowns before the Creator. They acknowledge their authority is delegated, and that it is subject to his authority.

The plan

John has been invited to enter God's temple to see what will happen 'after this'—that is, after the letters to the churches. There is a whole world in which Christians must live, and much to want to know, and the secrets of God's future for the world are in his book.

A moment of reflection will tell us that revealing and opening up this history is no small task and this is confirmed by there being no one worthy for the task.

John weeps. Is God inscrutable? Are his plans random? The whole Old Testament would tell him this is not so. In the midst of the worship of heaven, he weeps, until an elder explains what is going to happen.

The victorious Lion of Judah is present—intended incumbent of David's throne. John has not noticed the Lion because, when he looks, he sees a Lamb—as though just slain, like a Passover lamb or the Servant (Is. 53:7).

The Lamb

This Lamb has power—the horns. He has eyes that discern truly—the seven spirits of God (1:4) are now the eyes of the Lamb. Being sent out into all the earth, they can direct that strength to the saints (2 Chron. 16:9). A comparison with Zechariah's vision also suggest the eyes have to do with removing 'the iniquity of that land in one day' (Zech. 3:8-10; also 4:1-10).

The Lamb takes his power. Here is the dynamic of the ascension being spelled out. He is seated at the right hand of God and it is this that evokes a new outbreak of praise.

The worship

The first group, elders who bring the prayers of God's people to God sing a new song to add to the song of Moses at the time of the exodus (15:3; Exod. 15). They see that history can only rightly be in the hands of him who was killed to make atonement for sin, effectively buying them for God—a redemption from slavery, and doing so for people of all nations (so bringing the hostility to an end—Eph. 2:14-17).

A people truly released from guilt are a kingdom—that is, they have power, truly, because delegated, and safely, because it is the authority of the Lamb. They serve God as his priests to humanity—that is, their service is for others. In this way the promise first made to Moses is fulfilled (Exod. 19:6). In this way, 'reigning' is an appropriate word to use of Christians in this world, though reigning in the sense of enemies being defeated remains future.

A second group—innumerable angels, joins the praise. This is not happening in a corner!

A third group is, by way of anticipation, the whole creation at worship. And equal praise is given to God and the Lamb. While it may be that the contested doctrine today is the doctrine of God, we know no other God than the one revealed by Jesus Christ and revealed in his atoning death and victorious resurrection.

When Paul got his opportunity to teach about God in the midst of idols at Athens, it happened because he had been proclaiming 'Jesus and the resurrection' (Acts 17:18). Christ crucified is the justification of God and the truth about God. All else is misrepresentation and without power. The God we know is the God who has stepped into our tragedy and redeemed us.

'So surely as Jesus has accomplished the first and most important stage in the redemption of humanity, so will he complete his appointed task of bringing to victory the kingdom of God and thereby the total emancipation of humanity from the powers of evil' (George R. Beasley-Murray; qu. in The Message of the Living God, p. 314).

Eternal love in time

Returning to God being he 'who is and was and is to come', we see now that eternal love has not remained aloof from our world or our plight, but rather, has secured our future. This truth must galvanise our whole living in this world.