

STUDY 20

Always There Is the Throne

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TRUE HOPE AND FEIGNED HOPES

The purpose of this final session is to lead us to move out in genuine assured hope of inheriting the kingdom. This is where we stand in danger, despite all we have heard so far, of lapsing back into certain default expressions of Christian hope that have been the inadequate staple diet of those who have sought to be satisfied with something less than the whole gospel. These can be characterised as:

1. **Future Compensation:** The injustices and deprivations of this age will be righted and compensated for in the age to come. Seen by some as the one and only rationale for 'religion', this tends to be embraced by those overwhelmed by difficulty and suffering who see no apparent way out. Caricatured in the ditty sung by hungry converts, 'There'll be pie in the sky by and by when we die'—because we're certainly not getting it here. This approach takes God's future promises seriously, but can lead to passivity and despondency in the present.
2. **Divine Intervention:** Things are pretty crook, and don't expect that anything we do can make them any better, but all will be put right and we will be vindicated when God intervenes supernaturally. This may take apocalyptic form at the (imminent) end time, or may be in the form of common expectation of the miraculous. This reaction to rampant evil in the world recognises the reality of God's sovereignty over all, but also can engender a certain disengagement from present realities and responsibilities.
3. **Present Realisation:** By living out the values of Christ we can effect changes that will bring the kingdom of God to pass in this age. This takes kingdom ethics and their practice seriously, but can be a bit naive as to the perfectibility of the present world systems and the need for judgement, and so can tend towards activism resulting in discouragement.
4. **Self Preservation:** We may not be able to do much about changing the world, but at least we can seek to set up a church and community environment that suits and safeguards ourselves and our families as Christian. This can represent genuine attempts to save and change and sustain human beings in certain contexts, but is not always good at being exposed to wider issues and complex demands that arise from engagement in a sinful world.

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Each of these has a grasp of the truth of the gospel. What needs to be asked of us all is: What was actually accomplished at the cross? What is the true nature of the ‘throne’ before which we all stand? What does the present authority and rule of Jesus Christ mean to us now? What is our present and future participation in Christ’s kingdom rule?

BEFORE THE THRONE

Let us take one of the glimpses the book of the Revelation affords us into the engine-room of the universe:

At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads (Rev. 4:2–4).¹

We are not told whether these ‘elders’ are human or celestial, but doubtless they have some connection with human ruling. Their thrones and crowns indicate that they are rulers.² It is also shown that they do not have this authority in their own right:

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

‘You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created’ (Rev. 4:9–11).

Their thrones and crowns derive from and belong to the One on the throne, and they give all glory where glory is due.

The same no doubt applies to the thrones given to the twelve apostles (see Luke 22:28–30), and to all of whom it is said, ‘they will reign on earth’ (Rev. 5:10). Our ruling in the kingdom of God derives from and belongs to Him.

If all ruling then comes from the throne, what is the nature of the throne? What is it that holds sway over all and determines the course of the universe, to which all of us are subject, and by which alone we rule? What is at the centre of the throne?

In Revelation 5 we are introduced to the action of the Lamb, who is invested with the honour of God:

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² These are ‘twenty-four who have authority in heaven and may be seen as the archetype of human elders’. ‘The main purpose of the elders is to rule—as is indicated by their garments and golden crowns. What or whom they rule is not made clear . . . We are simply content to see they are high up in the leadership of worship’, Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Revelation of St John the Divine: Commentary and Essays on the Book of Revelation* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1993), pp. 54, 262.

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seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song:

‘You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.’

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands singing with full voice,

‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!’

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!’

And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the elders fell down and worshiped (Rev. 5:6–14).

It is the saving action of the cross that shows this one to have the rulership and honour of God, and it is this action that constitutes his authority, by which he can ‘open the scroll’, which is to exercise control of all that unfolds in human history—the judgements and the blessings, and their proper timing. In Revelation 7 this one is said to be ‘at the center of the throne’:

For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Rev. 7:15–17).

Who are the beneficiaries of this great ruling? Those who have related with him in this saving action of the cross: ‘they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’, and so have been brought out of ‘the great ordeal’ of judgement (Rev. 7:14).

The same point is made in a different way in Philippians 2. On what account did God exalt Jesus as Lord, with ‘the name that is above every name’, at which every knee, willingly or unwillingly, will bend, and every tongue confess, ‘to the glory of God the Father’ (see Phil. 2:9–11)? It is not by some inherent power and authority of his own, nor as any form of compensation, but simply and entirely because, at the Father’s command, Jesus:

being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross (Phil. 2:7–8).

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This is what is at the centre of the throne, and that is what has only ever constituted its heart (see 1 Pet. 1:18–21; Rev. 13:8). This saving love-action of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and our response to it, now governs us and the universe. It is by that love-action we inherit the kingship, and it is by that love-action, through the gospel, that we exercise its rule.

INHERIT THE KINGDOM

Inheriting the kingdom—as both recipients and participants in its ruling—remains our goal, and it is always related to the action of the cross.

The Son of Man, the true human being, on his throne as king, will say to ‘the righteous’ (Matt. 25:46):

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:34).

What ‘throne’ does the Son of Man occupy, and how does he come to be there? In the very next chapter Jesus says of the events of the cross that are shortly to take place:

From now on you will see the Son of Man
seated at the right hand of Power
and coming on the clouds of heaven (Matt. 26:64).

How do those at his right hand come to be there and to be called ‘righteous’? They are there because it has been prepared for them by the Father (see Matt. 20:23), and they are counted righteous because they have believed in God’s propitiating action for them in Christ (see Luke 18:13–14; Matt. 5:6, 20; 6:33; Rom. 3:21–26). Their righteous actions now reflect His.³

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, Paul the apostle says who will and who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Those who will not inherit the kingdom are those who in their guilty sinful actions remain opposed to God’s good rule:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9–10).

Paul gives a similar warning in Galatians 5 and Ephesians 5:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19–21).

Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (Eph. 5:5).

³ For further on this interpretation of the parable of the sheep and the goats, see Martin Bleby, *God Speaking: Authority and Interpretation in the Scriptures* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2006), pp. 113–121.

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What changes this situation? The removal of their guilt in the saving action of the cross of Christ:

And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:11).

The action of the throne, and where we stand with regard to it, is what determines the inheritance. From this grows the ‘fruit of the Spirit’: ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control’ (Gal. 5:22–23), which is entirely consistent with kingdom living.

In 1 Corinthians 15:50, we are told:

flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

How then can we, in our perishable flesh, ever inherit the kingdom of God? We need to be changed, to be made capable of sustaining ‘an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure’ (2 Cor. 4:17), through nothing less than a participation in the resurrection of Christ, that we have because we have also participated through faith and baptism in his death and burial (see Rom. 6:3–5; Col. 2:12):

we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:51–53).

And so, what is mortal will be ‘be swallowed up by life’ (2 Cor. 5:4).

RULE IN LIFE

So it is ‘those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness’ who will ‘exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 5:17). That one man Jesus Christ is now already in the exercise of that dominion—‘all authority in heaven and on earth has been given’ to him (Matt. 28:18). In this age now all opposed to him are being subjected to him and his saving throne-action—either willingly, by faith, or unwillingly, by judgement on continued resistance:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor. 15:20–26).

This placing of enemies under Christ is the action of the Father, who remains supreme ‘above all and through all and in all’ (Eph. 4:6), subject to none—for it is the Father’s kingdom, in His love and good purposes for His children:

For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet.’ But when it says, ‘All things are put in subjection,’ it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him (1 Cor. 15:27).

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It is also ‘the kingdom of the Son of his love’ (Col. 1:13).⁴ The willing subjection to the Father of the now human Son in his reign over all things epitomises the position and function that human beings were made for and called to occupy from the beginning, as those made in God’s filial image and likeness (see Gen. 1:26–28; compare Gen. 5:1–3; Luke 3:23, 38; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:42–50). So we see in the end the true ‘Son of Man’ gladly coming into his rightfully placed dominion, bringing with him all ‘the holy ones of the Most High’ (see Dan. 7:13–14, 18, 22, 27; compare Heb. 2:11–13):

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever’ (Rev. 11:15; compare Eph. 5:5)—subject to Christ, the world has been brought, with the Son, to be subject to the Father. So the Father brings His ‘many children to glory’ (Heb. 2:10), as the Son, ‘the one who sanctifies’, together with ‘those who are sanctified’ (Heb. 2:11), comes before the throne of grace of the one Father of all saying: ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me’ (Heb. 2:13).

With such a ‘gospel of the kingdom’ (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; compare Acts 20:24–25), who would not wish to participate in its rule? How do we participate in the bringing of all Christ’s enemies under his feet?

When Psalm 149 was written, it may well have had direct military connotations:

Praise the LORD!
Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.
Let Israel be glad in its Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.
Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.
For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the humble with victory.
Let the faithful exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their couches.
Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,
to bind their kings with fetters
and their nobles with chains of iron,
to execute on them the judgment decreed.
This is glory for all his faithful ones.
Praise the LORD! (Psalm 149:1–9).

What might be the prophetic application of the ‘two-edged swords’ in the life of the new Israel in the present age of Christ? Revelation 19 may give us a lead:

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many

⁴ Literal translation of τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ (*tēn basileian tou huiou tēs agapēs autou*).

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diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (Rev. 19:11–16).

Geoffrey Bingham's observation is enlightening, together with the temporary effect it has on the forces of darkness:

In a trice the silence was broken by the coarse and hideous laughter of the dark army. They shook with horrible mirth for they had perceived a strange thing. They pointed at it and jeered and slapped their sides with unholy joy, for what they saw was true, and I must tell it though you believe me not. There was not one weapon in the hands of the army of light.⁵

Not one weapon, that is, apart from the sword that comes from the mouth of the King of kings and Lord of lords—the word of the truth of the gospel, which he speaks through the mouths and lives of his 'armies of heaven' whose robes are 'white and pure'. Or, as it says in another place:

But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death (Rev. 12:11)

—because they knew that not even death could separate them from the love of God that had come to them in Jesus Christ our Lord (see Rom. 8:31–39).

⁵ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Bright Bird and Shining Sails*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2007, p. 112.