

Our Holy God Reigns Supreme on the Highest Throne!

Call to Worship: Isaiah 40:21-26

Hymn #81- *A Mighty Fortress is our God*

1st Scripture: Ezekiel 1

Hymn Insert- *Before the Throne of God Above*

2nd Scripture: Revelation 4

Hymn Insert- *Psalm 47; Praise to God, the Ruler of the Earth*

Introduction:

In chapter 1:19, our Lord gave the Apostle John the following command, “Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.” As we move into chapter 4, John is now preparing to transition from “the things which are” to “the things which will take place after this.” The “things which are,” consist of the present state of the seven churches. Now having an accurate assessment of their spiritual condition, the motivation to overcome is greatly strengthened by the following revelation of “the things which must take place after this.” And brethren, as these seven churches represent all churches of all times, it behooves us to consider our own *present* reality (as individuals and as a church) in the light of them, so that we might benefit as well from the remainder of the revelation, especially as it is meant *not* to satisfy our curiosity about specific future events, but rather to motivate us to press on, to persevere and to overcome in light of what must take place in accordance with the divine decree of God.

But as we head in the direction of “the things which will take place after this,” our Lord, through the mediation of John, would first have us lift our eyes into the heavenly courtroom, wherein we find the throne of God at the center of all things, so that we can carry this unchanging divine perspective with us, at all times, in light of all that is to come. These next two chapters make up a critical bridge, which must always remain in place from the perspective of our minds eye, as we consider “the things which are,” and “the things which will take place after this.” And it is only in so far as we, with John, maintain this heavenward gaze into the door of the courtroom of heaven, that we will find ourselves boldly overcoming all that we face within the earthly realm. To be sure, the Book of Revelation will carry us back here throughout the Book (in various ways), reminding us that it is here that we will maintain a true vision of “what

really is,” in light of “what seems to be” from the perspective of the world. For it is here that history is determined and carried out by the hand of our all sovereign God, and it is here in this unwavering, unchanging heavenly court, seated with Christ, that we will find a secure place of rest, as we work out our salvation in an unstable and ever changing world.

And so, having received a vision of “that which is,” we are told in chapter 4:1-2, “After these things [after having documented the letters to the seven churches of Asia] I looked, and behold, a door standing in heaven. And the first voice which I heard [that is the mighty voice of the exalted, reigning Christ—1:10ff] was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this. Immediately, I was in the Spirit; and behold...”

And so, apparently, having received the first portion of the revelation, John is once again aware of his natural surroundings, when he looks up and sees this door standing open in heaven. And then Christ calls him into it, and John is once again carried away in the Spirit (1:10), and his natural surroundings are now completely replaced by the reality of the vision he is receiving of the heavenly court and the throne room of God. And the first thing he perceives as he begins to process this revelatory environment is a throne. Notice, in verse 2, continuing on, John states, “Immediately [at the voice of Christ] I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven...”

Now brethren, before we continue onward and consider the remaining glory of this majestic vision, it is important to note something very significant right here. The first thing John sees here is the throne of God, and we will find that this “throne” is greatly emphasized in the Book of Revelation as a whole, and especially in these next two chapters (4&5). This is absolutely critical and meant to be carried with us throughout the remainder of the Book, and throughout the remainder of our lives. We must continuously gaze in that door with John, and behold the throne of God, if we are to persevere and overcome all of the very real difficulties and trials that we will face in this life. I will come back to this point at the conclusion of this sermon, but note for now that “the throne as a symbol occurs more than forty times in Revelation. Three out of four times that it occurs in the NT it is found in Revelation” (Mounce, pg. 119). Clearly then, the absolute sovereignty of God is a major, major theme of this Book.

[Read Revelation 4:2-11]

Now brethren, as we gaze upon this glorious scene, there are three things that we must consider in order to benefit from its proper motivation:

- 1- We must consider the general make-up and design of the vision
- 2- We must consider the two primary messages given in the vision
- 3- We must consider the way in which this vision motivates the people of God to overcome all that they will face in the world

I. The General Make-up and Design of the Vision

Now, as we consider the make-up and design of this vision, it is important that we maintain the unity of the vision, without getting lost in all of the individual parts. In other words, we are not meant to discover every detailed meaning of every item described (nor could we do that if we wanted to), but rather, we want to see the whole vision for what it is, as a coming together of all of its individual parts, to bring forth a significant meaning with great impact (similar to how parables are to be interpreted). And so, while we could speculate as to what the “jasper and sardius stone” like appearance are meant to specifically indicate (perhaps the holiness and purity of God) or even the rainbow around the throne (which may signify the glorious attribute of God’s grace, as shown in the sign that God gave Noah following the flood...etc), we will concentrate more on the details in so much as they support the whole pictorial structure.

Now, when we look at this picture, perhaps from an aerial standpoint, what we are meant to see is a system of concentric circles. Young people, when you drop a rock into a pool or a lake, what happens? It generally creates a system of concentric circles on the water’s surface, right? You see a smaller circle first (where the rock hit the water), and then a bigger circle surrounds that smaller one and then a bigger one surrounds both of those, and it goes outward some distance to a final “largest circle” in accordance with how heavy the rock was. Well, that is what we have here. And this system of concentric circles is described for us, in its fullness, in chapters 4 and 5 (which we will be considering in more detail, next week, Lord willing).

Now, at the center of this system of concentric circles, we find a universal throne, which represents the all sovereign reign and power of the One who sits upon it. This throne is at the center of every living and created thing in all of existence. It represents The Supreme Power that governs and rules everything that exists (in heaven, on earth, under the earth, all of history, all of time, all that transcends time...etc), barring nothing! Nothing is outside of the jurisdiction or power of this throne.

And as John looks from that throne outward, the first thing he sees in this vision is He who sits directly upon that throne, at the center of all sovereign rule and power. And this, of course, is none other than God the Father. And we are not given a specific description of the Father's Person here, but rather, John beholds different aspects of His glory, which would serve to expose His majesty, holiness, purity and wondrous splendor. Out from the throne, radiates all manner of crystal and gem like beams; "He who sat [on the throne]," we are told, "was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald." You get the sense here that John is trying to describe something that is just indescribable. How these colors radiate off of the Person of God, revealing His glory, which is then surrounded by a glorious rainbow, is beyond explanation. We are not meant to get an exact understanding of the description. It is simply a composite way of John explaining the unexplainable and saying, "the One who sat there, radiated a glory, a beauty, a majestic radiance and splendor that is unmatched." And it conveys a message of holiness and majesty which is meant to sanctify and elevate the Person seated there, as the One who is the very *beginning of* and *sovereign over* all things! These glorious beams form additional concentric circles around the King and His throne.

And then, as you move outward, you find another concentric circle encircling this throne and all of its glory. In verse 4, we are told, "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."

Four of the promises given to those who overcome, written in the letters to the seven churches, were that, they would be given the "crown of life" (Rev. 2:10), they would be given "power over the nations" (Rev. 2:26), they would be "clothed in white garments" (Rev. 3:5), and they would "sit with [Christ] on His throne" (Rev. 3:21). I believe that we get a taste of that here

in chapter four, as we behold the 24 redeemed overcomers, who surround the throne of God. Why 24? I believe that these 24 represent the overcomers in the Old and New Covenants together, as one church, the foundation of which rests in the 12 Patriarchs of the OT and the 12 Apostles of the NT. On these 24, the church of all time has been built, and so, they represent us. We will see this again in Revelation 21:9-21, when the New Jerusalem, the Bride of Christ, in her fullness, comes down out of heaven, glorious and prepared to meet her Groom. There, we are told that the New Jerusalem, the church in her fullness and the Bride of Christ, had twelve gates and twelve foundations. On the twelve gates, were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and on the twelve foundations were written the names of the Apostles, all as representative of the universal church. You might recall as well in Matthew 19:28 and in Luke 22:30, that our Lord, speaking to His Apostles, said that they would “sit on thrones judging the tribes of Israel.”

Later on, as these twelve elders worship God as Creator (Rev. 4:10), we find them casting their crowns before His throne, as if to acknowledge that their victory and triumph, ultimately belong to Him, because He is the sovereign Ruler who has brought them to overcome in Christ! And so, brethren, these elders would seem to represent the church, in her fullness, as if to encourage the seven churches of Asia (and us), all the more to persevere and overcome, because God is faithful to keep all of His promises. Those who overcome will experience the joy of surrounding the throne of God and the Lamb, and they will marvel over the glory and presence of God, in all of His holy majesty and splendor.

After viewing these elders, John’s attention is drawn back to the throne again, following the direction of his ears, which hear various loud sounds. Notice, we are told in verse 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.”

John not only gets a picture of God’s grace in the twelve elders who surrounded the throne, but he also gets a picture of God’s judgment and power. The lightnings and thunderings are indicative of the power and terror of God, as displayed on Mount Sinai before Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness. We will see later in the Book of Revelation how the condemned find their origin of judgment here. Again, there is the emphasis on our holy God’s sovereign control, power and judgment. And the voices may be the repeated shouts of the living creatures, who we

are told in verse 8, do not rest day or night, as they proclaim and declare the holiness of God. And before the throne, we find as well the seven lamps, burning with fire, which we are told, are the “seven Spirits of God.” Having already considered this in chapter 1:4, we have determined that these “seven Spirits of God,” most likely represent the Holy Spirit in all of His fullness and omnipotent power, especially as He functions as the source of any and all light to be exhibited by the churches, as reflections of the glory of God to the world. Only where the Spirit is operative, is the church said to bear light in any real sense. When the Spirit is gone, the lampstand goes out. And so, we would expect to see the Holy Spirit before the throne as well, especially making known the glory of God and of the Lamb (as we will see in chapter 5).

And then, we are told in verse 6, that John also notices that “before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal.” There are differences of opinion as to what this crystalline “sea of glass” actually is. When referencing Exodus 24:10 & Ezekiel 1:22, you find that this glorious tranquil sea, rests beneath the feet of God, and in Revelation 15:2, there is fire mingled within this sea and the saints who overcome the beast, stand above it, while the beast is below it, as if to stand separated from the beast by means of it. Some see it as represented by the laver that rested outside of the temple, which was used to wash and clean the priests before they entered the temple. In that sense, it would have a sanctifying purpose, and from the standpoint of God and those in heaven, it is tranquil because all who are there are completely sanctified. There is certainly some connection between this sea above and the earth below, to the extent that some have even seen it as representative of the floor of heaven and the ceiling of the earth. In this sense, those who are seated in heaven; those in Christ, remain on the tranquil side of this sea, while those who are of the earth, remain in turmoil beneath it. Suffice it to say, that from the standpoint of God it is glorious, crystalline in appearance and at rest.

Moving back again from the throne, another concentric circle is formed, which stands closer to the throne than the twenty-four elders (and in fact, on the outer rim of the throne itself). In verse 6, John moves on to say, “And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle. The four 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!’”

These glorious beings seem to be the same creatures who carried and transported the throne of God in Ezekiel’s vision, from Ezekiel chapter 1 (and 10:2). And they also share some of the similar qualities attributed to the seraphim described in Isaiah 6, who there, likewise proclaimed the glory of God’s holiness continually. Upon careful consideration, one would find that these four living creatures represent the Cherubim, who surround God’s throne and ensure that nothing unholy comes near His presence (which is why they are full of eyes, here in this vision). When Adam and Eve sinned, in Genesis 3:24, after God had expelled them from the Garden of Eden, He placed cherubim at the east of the Garden with a flaming sword, ensuring that none would have access to the tree of life. And furthermore, these cherubim are represented by the winged creatures, who were crafted of olive wood and overlaid with gold, and placed on the top of the Ark of the Covenant, surrounding the mercy seat in the Most Holy place of the Temple (see 1 Kings 6:23-28). These glorious, ministering servants of God surround His throne and repeatedly declare the glory of His holiness to all. Is it not fascinating to recognize here, for a moment, brethren, that our God is so holy, that glorious angelic creatures have been created specifically for the purpose of declaring, emphasizing and guarding that holiness? This is not so much to say that God is dependent upon the cherubim, as it is a means of communicating something about the glorious, holy character of God to all who come before Him. In other words, God’s holiness is so pronounced, as to the nature of its reality, that it must be proclaimed continually to all lesser beings, and by this means, God properly and rightly receives the honor and glory due Him for His holy nature. These beings, in part, serve to justly expose the holiness of God! The various descriptions of having faces like a lion, a calf, a man and an eagle, may be indicative of the created innate qualities they have, as a means of performing their ministry unto God. They are powerful, laborious, wise and swift beings! Suffice it to say, brethren, that there are glorious, angelic beings that are yet to be seen from our standpoint, and even these beings recognize their proper place, and they gladly bow before the God who created and designed them unto their various, coveted purposes!

And so, moving outward from these living creatures, and past the twenty-four elders, in chapter five, we will find two more outer concentric circles. First, we come upon a layer of

angels beyond number (Rev. 5:11- “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands...”) In other words, John saw a multitude of angels that was too large to count.

And then finally, there is an outer most concentric circle, given in this vision, which is represented by “every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them...” (Rev. 5:13).

Now brethren, while I do not believe this is a literal reality that John was seeing (it was a vision, representing an even far greater and more intense reality), the reality conveyed here is dumbfounding and amazing, isn't it? This is the scene that John beholds in this vision of God's heavenly court. And it is truly amazing to see how the twenty-four elders (representing the church) are so close to the throne in this vision! But let's now quickly move on to begin to discover the meaning of this vision, keeping in mind that it will not ultimately find its completion until we get through chapter 5.

II. The Two Primary Messages Given in the Vision

There are two primary messages given in this vision, in so far, as it reaches the end of chapter four, and those two primary messages are revealed in the two songs of praise given in verses 8 and 11.

1) The first primary message given in this vision is the declaration of the holiness of God, sung by the four living creatures in verse 8: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!” This repeated proclamation by the living creatures is the headline that is meant to express what has been seen up to this point in chapter four. In other words, even if we cannot understand some of the symbols, this song, gives us everything we need to know to get the message that is meant to motivate us as we work through the remainder of the revelation, considering those things which “must take place after this” (vs. 1).

2) The second primary message given in this vision is the declaration of God's glory and worthiness as *Creator of all things*. And with a sense of amazing order, the twenty-four elders follow the song of the Cherubim with the song given in verse 11. [Read verses 9-11].

And so, this song, gives us everything else we need to know up to this point, which is meant to motivate us as we work through the remainder of the revelation, considering those things which "must take place after this" (vs. 1). This song gives us a proper view of the glory and worth of God as our holy Creator!

Now brethren, for a moment, before we bring this all to a conclusion by considering specifically how these two songs are meant to motivate us onward, notice something fascinating about the way God's praise is worked through these concentric circles. In chapter four, we find the living creatures, who are nearest to the throne, opening up with praising God for His holiness. And then the next concentric circle, namely, the twenty-four elders, follow up with praise to God as our worthy Creator. And then, we will see next week how both the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders sing praise to Christ, the Lamb, for His accomplishing the redemption of His people. And then, working from in to out, the living creatures and the elders are joined by the angels, offering additional praise to Christ, who was slain for His people. And then, finally, the outer circle, containing every living creature (in heaven, on earth, under the earth, in the sea...etc) join in, to praise both God and the Lamb together. And all of this is sealed with an "Amen" from the living creatures (at the first concentric circle), followed by the twenty-four elders falling down and worshipping God. The order and the beauty of this intensity of praise and worship is probably beyond what we could even imagine. Hopefully, it will cause us to examine our own praise here in this church, brethren! Are we distracted, aloof, lethargic and complacent with our worship of God, muttering the hymns with no thought upon the words, when this is the scene of heaven's glory? Oh brethren, our flesh is indeed weak, but let us fight to join that heavenly chorus now, which ought to be represented in our times of worship, as we gather here together each week as a body! Well brethren, let us bring this all together to a proper conclusion:

III. The way in which this vision motivates the people of God to overcome all that they will face in the world

Here it is, brethren: As everything throughout Revelation, chapters 6 and following, becomes our experience, we will be tempted toward compromise; we will be tempted to drift away, thereby snuffing out our candle as a church. Perhaps physical persecution will come upon us? Perhaps the temptation toward religious compromise will come our way? Perhaps materialism and the love of the world will seek to sink its teeth into us? The difficulties, the sorrows and the challenges are indeed many in this life, and if we are going to make it, then we must always, continually, daily, consistently keep the truth of “what really is taking place” *from God’s standpoint*, in mind.

We must stop in the middle of our busy and tedious days of life and suffering and trial, and we must, with John, look up to that doorway that leads into God’s heavenly court. And we must remind ourselves of what John saw. You see, what John saw is what we see now by faith. We don’t need to experience what John experienced. It is given us right here in the Word. We just need to constantly and prayerfully bring our minds and hearts here. And by this means, we will overcome. How can I be certain of this?

Because at the center of everything; at the inner most circle of everything ever created (with this world at the outer most circle), rests the universal, all sovereign throne of our holy God and Creator! At the center of it all, lays the glory of God and everything...everything...is working out right in accordance with His divine plan. The injustices of the world are not unknown to God! He who sits amidst the “eye covered cherubim” sees it all, and He will recompense the wicked in the end. Their judgment is sure and final, if they remain outside of Christ! And He is the creator of all things! He designed everything to move and flow right according to plan, and He will, and has the power to ensure that, He will bring everything to its proper completion in due time, which includes your safe entry into His presence, surrounding His throne, wearing a golden crown of victory, and clothed in white with Christ (which will take us into chapter 5 next week). You see, brethren, the throne reminds us that everything is working together for the good of God’s people...everything! Every pain, every sorrow, every felt persecution...they are all used by God to complete His glorious work of grace in you, and in

the end, you will see Christ and be even as He is...perfectly holy! This is one portion of the bridge, which leads us into the revelation of all that “must take place after this.”

Brethren, let me leave you with one final quote from G.K. Beale, taken from his fine and thorough commentary on Revelation:

“The hymn from Daniel 4:35-37 is alluded to [*in Rev. 4:11b*] because it emphasizes not merely God’s sovereignty over creation but that all things have been created to serve His purposes and especially that He unswervingly accomplishes His will through all history without any possibility of being thwarted in the process. His people must trust in this fact so that, even when they experience suffering, they can rest assured that it has a redemptive purpose and is in accordance with His will. But how does God carry out His plan on behalf of His people? Ch. 5 explains how: through Christ’s death and resurrection and that Spirit which God gives to His followers.”

The Gospel

AMEN!!!