

I'm going to continue the series on the book of Revelation as planned because it is very suitable for comfort as we face the covid 19 pandemic. These are scary times, but we all know that that one of the things that is pleasing to God in a time like this is that we, his people, trust in him and not be afraid. For instance, Paul tells us in Philippians 4:6-7, "[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." May God give us that peace.

The reason we are not to be anxious is that God promises to work everything together for our good. Romans 8:28 says "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." That does not mean that we will not suffer. If anything is clear from the biblical teaching it is that God's love for his people and God's care for his people does not mean that they will be spared suffering in this life. The comfort is not that we will not suffer, but that no suffering will separate us from the love of Christ. Nothing can harm us in the light of eternity. If we suffer, it is comforting to know that this is God's will for our good and the end of suffering is just over the horizon when we enter the nearer presence of God either by death or by the return of Christ to make all things new.

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17 "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." Paul continues in this passage with these glorious words, "as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

And the book of Revelation helps us to do that. Of course the whole Bible helps us to look at life in the light of eternity, but the book of Revelation was especially written to help Christians through hard times and what it especially does is help us to look at the goings on on earth from the perspective of heaven. I personally limit my use of the term "heaven" because the ultimate hope that the Bible holds out for us is not heaven, but the new heavens and the new earth. That is very important for our understanding of the whole plan of salvation which is the renewal of all things. But "heaven" is an important word in the book of Revelation because it refers to the transcendent realm where God dwells right now along with the heavenly beings and the glorified saints.

The book of Revelation enables us to look into heaven through the eyes of John who was given to see into heaven and describe for us what he saw. And we are given a vivid and glorious account of the relationship between the things that we experience on earth and the commands and actions of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in heaven - which are the ultimate cause of the things that happen on this earth. That includes that which is top of mind at the moment – the covid 19 pandemic.

Revelation 4 and 5 describe what things look like in heaven. It is all symbolic, of course, but it is intended to give us a scene to imagine – something to visualize – which while symbolic is nevertheless true. What we see in this vision is true and real. This vision accurately describes what is going on in heaven and it accurately

describes the relationship between what is going on in heaven and the events that happen on earth. We won't get to all of it in this sermon. Chapter 4 sets the scene.

So we will have a look at what John describes for us. "After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne."

The first thing that John is shown is a "throne, with one seated on the throne." This is the key to everything. It tells us who is in charge. A throne is the place of rule and authority. This throne is in heaven and the one who is seated on it is God. We read of this same truth in Psalm 103:19 which says, "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all."

The words of king Nebuchadnezzar express this thought well. Nebuchadnezzar was a wicked king, but he was given periods of insight and in this text what he uttered was absolutely true, Daniel 4:34-35. He says of God, "[H]is dominion is an everlasting dominion and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'"

That is the significance of the throne that we see when the eyes of our imagination see what John saw when he was given this vision of heaven. The book of Revelation is given to instruct and encourage the church of Jesus Christ in difficult times, and the key thing that John is given to see when he is given to look into heaven is a throne with God seated upon it. This is what we need to know and to dwell on as we face a threat that is beyond anything that most of us have ever experienced. There is a realm beyond this earthly realm – a realm that the Bible calls heaven and the key feature of that realm is a throne with the most-high God sitting upon it.

The one who sits on that throne is far greater than any other power or authority. This pandemic is demonstrating in a very striking way that human authorities are not able to control it. There are things that are being done and hopefully they are making a difference, but it is more than obvious that all the power and authority of human beings is not able to control this thing. But the one who sits on the throne in heaven has an authority and a power that is literally infinitely beyond any human power or authority. God's power and authority are utterly exhaustive in that there is nothing that is beyond it. God controls literally everything. As we read in Matthew 10:29, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father."

The throne in heaven means that God rules over everything. Absolutely nothing happens apart from his will. That is a huge part of the message of the book of Revelation. And it is intended to give comfort to people of God who are facing hardships in their lives. The throne in heaven means that not one of the microscopic viruses can continue to exist or make any move apart from the will of him who sits on the throne.

This point is made in this passage when the voice which invites John into heaven says, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” To know what must take place requires the control of everything that happens. All of the prophecies in the Bible which tell us what will take place, assume that history is under God’s control. Likewise when the word “must” is used in these contexts, it is a reference to the plan of God. Certain things **must** take place because God has ordained that they take place. For instance, in Luke 21:9, Jesus says, “And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.” We live in a world where everything that happens must happen because it is all part of God’s plan for the world.

That does not mean that we can be careless. It does not mean that we should not take precautions. God’s total control of everything never means that what we do is meaningless and insignificant. This belongs to the mystery of the way that God has structured his creation. Nothing happens apart from God’s will and yet we are to live wisely which means taking actions, as we are able, to protect ourselves from danger including sickness.

Now this can be an intellectual difficulty, but it is actually a huge part of the wonder of life for God’s people. It means that what we do matters. Life is real and truly significant. And yet it means that we can trust in God – that we can pray to God and that God is able to work everything together for our good. So it is a glorious truth that we must use our brains and make wise decisions and at the same time trust that nothing happens to us apart from God’s will and trust that prayer is significant, and that God does things in answer to prayer.

But let’s go on in this chapter. The most comforting thoughts in a time like this are thoughts of God if we are believers and this chapter has a lot to say about God. Verse 3 says “And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.” The appearance of God is never described. God is invisible and so the Bible always speaks of what is happening around him to convey to us aspects of his glory. The only time humans ever saw God directly when people saw Jesus.

Here we are told that the one who sat on the throne “had the appearance of jasper and carnelian and all around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.” The significance of these precious stones is not found in symbolism related to each stone, but in the overall impression of beauty and luminosity and splendor and glory. These stones also appear in OT contexts where there are visions of the glory of God.

The rainbow is significant. “[A]round the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.” The rainbow reminds us of the sign of the rainbow that God gave to Noah, and through him to us, after the flood. The rainbow was a sign of God’s mercy after the judgement of the flood. The flood, of course, was a great act of judgment of God against sinful humanity. There is going to be a lot of that to come in the book of Revelation. But the rainbow here reminds us that there is mercy as well as judgment. The rainbow in Genesis was a sign that God was going to continue to pursue his plan of salvation for the world. And we can

understand it in the same way here. The book of Revelation is going to speak a lot of the judgments of God upon the earth because of sin, but the rainbow around the throne is a reminder that God is a promise-keeping God and he will fulfill the promises of salvation that drive the biblical story.

That is very relevant to us in this pandemic. The pandemic is an expression of the wrath of God against sinful humanity. We will see in some of the passages to come in the book of Revelation that throughout the time between the first and second comings of Christ, God pours out his wrath upon the unbelieving world as a warning and a foreshadowing of the final punishment to come to those who do not repent. This does not mean that those nations which are harder hit by the pandemic are more sinful than others. But there can be no doubt that this pandemic is a judgment of God upon a sinful world, while at the same time it is a test and a trial for God's people which is ultimately for our good. The difference is not that we are less worthy of judgment than the unbelieving world. The difference is God's grace through Christ and that alone. Furthermore, God shows mercy in many ways in the midst of the pandemic. I think it will be helpful to explore this subject in more detail in another sermon because there are many aspects to this subject.

But this vision of God on the throne with a rainbow around the throne reminds us of God's mercy and his promise to continue his plan of salvation throughout history right to the end. The rainbow reminds us that God is a promise-making and a promise-keeping God and in the midst of his wrath he also remembers mercy.

The rainbow that surrounds the throne of God in heaven answers the kinds of questions such as those recorded in Psalm 77:7-9, "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" We might be wondering along these lines as we watch the new coronavirus spread around the globe and in our communities and as we hear of the numbers of people who have died. These questions might come to our minds with a growing intensity in the coming days. But the rainbow around the throne of God is a reminder to us that God's wrath and his mercy run parallel to one another in history and during any historical moment. God's plan of salvation is still going forward. The judgments of God are opportunities for people to repent and turn to the Lord.

Let's look now at what John describes next. Verse 4, "Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads."

These twenty-four elders on twenty-four thrones represent the people of God of both the Old and New Testaments. In Revelation 21, when the new Jerusalem is described, the names of the twelve sons of Israel are inscribed on the twelve gates of the city and the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb were inscribed on the 12 foundations of the city. One of the ways, then, that the book of Revelation refers to the totality of the people of God by the twelve sons of Jacob as representing the OT people of God and the twelve apostles of

Jesus as representing the NT people of God. So the 24 elders gathered around the throne of God clothed with white garments and with crowns on their heads represent all of the people of God.

Now as I have mentioned a number of times, one of the wonderful things about the kind of symbolism that we find in the book of Revelation is that it does not have to be logically coherent. The symbols convey truth, but there is no interest in presenting symbols and pictures that are completely coherent and consistent. So in this case the 24 elders around the throne of God represent the complete church of Old and New Testaments. That means that this symbolism represents those who are already in heaven as well as those of us who are still on earth. There is a sense in which we are in heaven even as we are still on earth. The book of Hebrews says of believers on earth, in 12:22, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

So when we look into heaven and see the 24 elders seated on 24 thrones around the throne of God, we are part of that. When we worship we are in heaven around the throne of God. In Ephesians 2:6 Paul says of believers that God has "raised us up with him and seated us with in in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

We can't understand exactly what this means but at the very least the 24 elders represent the whole church. And there is some profound sense that when we worship together we are taking part in the on-going worship of heaven.

It is significant that the 24 elders which represent the church occupy a prominent place around the throne of God. Richard Philip writes in his commentary, "This vision is of great significance to believers on earth.... Notice that in this heavenly depiction of history, the Christian church is given the most prominent place close to the throne of God. While the world looks upon the church and Christians as being the most insignificant people ... they are actually the most significant people since they bear testimony to the gospel of Christ, and their worship is the most significant activity taking place in the world." (p. 169) What a comfort that is! We matter to the One who sits on the throne and we are seated around the throne in places of prominence. And among all the things that are taking place in the world at this moment, what the church is doing worshipping God is the most significant.

Well we must move on. Verse 5 turns our attention back to the throne. "From the throne came flashes of lightening, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God..."

The lightening and thunder are there to give us a sense of awe and reverent fear before the majestic greatness of God. This symbolism will be used more times in the book of Revelation, and it is a common way of conveying the awesome and fearful greatness of God in the Bible. Think of Psalm 97:2-5, "Cloud and thick

darkness are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the LORD < before the Lord of all the earth.”

There is a relationship between how profoundly we sense how great and awe-inspiring God is and how we view everything else – including for us at this moment, the new corona-virus pandemic. To put the pandemic in its proper perspective – meditate on this picture of God’s throne with its lightning and thunder. Be awe-struck by the greatness of God! Let him dominate the horizon of your thoughts! To the degree that you fear God – to that degree you will not fear the pandemic.

Also “before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God...” This is Revelation’s way of referring to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God together with God the Father and God the Son. He is equal with the Father and the Son in power and glory. He is in heaven along with the Father and the Son, but it is this same Holy Spirit who dwells in us both individually and collectively. He is the one who works in our hearts so that his Word does its work in us – strengthening us and enabling us to view our circumstances in a God-centered way. As the reality of this pandemic threatens to make us fearful and anxious let us look to the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us, to enable us to be dominated in our thoughts and emotions by the creation-dominating-reality of God who through Jesus Christ is our God.

Verse 6 says, “and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.” The sea in the Bible often refers to danger and chaos and evil. Psalm 65:7 refers to God as the one who “stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.” One of the ways that Jesus demonstrated that he was one with this God of the OT was by commanding the wind to stop and the sea to be calm. The point of all of this is that God is the one who is in control of the forces of chaos, danger and evil in this world. Before the throne of God there is a sea of glass like crystal. In the presence of God all his calm – chaos is absent – there is no danger. At the end of the book of Revelation in the new heavens and new earth there is a river of the water of life, but there is no sea. In the new heavens and the new earth there will be no chaos or danger or evil. But now already in heaven in the presence of God the sea before the throne of God is like glass.

Think of that when you are bombarded with the chaos of our time. By means of this vision we can look right into the throne-room in heaven and allow the peacefulness of that place permeate our souls so that we can look at what is going on around us and even in our own lives from the perspective of heaven. The sea before the throne of God is like glass.

The rest of this chapter is all about worship. Revelation 4:6b–8, “ And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and

within, and day and night they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!””

These four living creatures represent all the living creatures of the earth. The lion as the highest wild animal. The ox has the highest domestic animal. The eagle as the highest bird. And man is the highest earthly creature. Gregory Beale writes, “It is likely that the four figures are designed to be representative of the whole created order of animate life....” (p.329)

So we have the 24 elders sitting on 24 thrones representing the church and we have the four living creatures representing all the living creatures of the earth. And what they are all doing is praising God. Revelation 4:8b–11, “... day and night they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever,¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,¹¹ “Worthy are you, 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.””

This is what is going on in heaven. This is a vision that God gives us to give us the true perspective on reality. Vern Poythress comments on the meaning of the whole picture. “God is the all-important, all-determining spiritual center and power center for the universe.” Therefore, “creatures find their consummate fulfillment, the meaning and full satisfaction of their existence, in worshiping, serving and adoring him.”

This is huge for us in any context. It is huge for us in the present context of the pandemic. We need to look at the goings on on earth in the light of this picture. We need to be reminded that the worship of God is what life is all about. Whatever God does, he does for his glory. And our delightful purpose is to give him that glory through living to please him and through our worship. We can do that in pleasant times. We can do it in difficult times. This particular vision was given to the church to help them through hard times. May it function that way in our minds. May we carry with us the picture that this chapter paints for us.

This chapter mentions the church under the symbol of the 24 elders, clothed with white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. The white garments represent the righteousness of Christ. No doubt our response to the pandemic has exposed sins in our hearts and in our lives. Perhaps a lack of trust. Perhaps selfishness. Perhaps the idol of loving our pleasant lives of peace and prosperity more than God. Among many other things this is a test and we will always fail the test to some extent. Our hope is in Christ and the salvation that is in him. Let us remember the white garments. Let us repent of our sins. And let us go forward in joy and peace looking at the goings on on this earth from the perspective of heaven as this chapter enables us to do.