

3. A glimpse of heaven

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now let's pray and ask the Lord's help as we come to this passage. God our Father, as you have privileged us to look into heaven itself, this great throne room scene, we ask that the Holy Spirit will indeed take my words in all their imperfection, use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Now I've called tonight's study A Glimpse of Heaven. I don't think that's a very good title, so I'm about to give you a better one.

Let me read to you from the last battle, from the end of the Narnia stories. I should have gone there to begin with. This is towards the end of the story as Aslan's friends are about to meet him.

Lewis talks about, you may have been in a room in which there was a window that looked out on a lovely bay of the sea, on a green valley that wound away among the mountains.

And in the wall of that room, opposite to the window, there may have been a looking glass. And whichever way you turned, you saw the sea and the valley.

[1 : 23] And the sea in the mirror, in one sense, was as real as the one that was actually there. The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that.

It was the unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. I have come home at last. This is my real country. I belong here.

This is the land I've been looking for all my life, though I never knew it until now. The reason why we love the old Narnia is that sometimes it looked a little like this.

Come on, further up and further in. That is a far better title, is it not, for our study on Revelation 4 and 5.

Further up and further in. And we will be returning to this, the last battle I mean, from time to time. Fear not. So, a door is opened in heaven as this second section of the book opens.

[2 : 27] I suggested to you last week that it's a good thing to look at the book of Revelation in four sections where the phrase, in the Spirit, occurs. In chapter 1, John says, I was in the Spirit.

And he's given these messages to the churches that we looked at this morning. Now, once again, verse 3, at once I was in the Spirit. And this long section, which really runs from here until the end of chapter 16, is going to be a series of judgments.

Chapters 1 to 3 is Christ and the Church. This chapter's four and following is more Christ and the nations, Christ and the world. As we'll see, in this long section, there's a number of interludes that tell us what is happening to God's people, what's happening to the Church as these judgments are unleashed on the world.

So, it's a kind of pivot of the book. It looks back to the Church of chapters 1 to 3, and it looks forward to the judgments on the world. John says, the voice says, come up here, and I will show you what must take place.

He is being invited further up and further in. He's being shown the realities of heaven itself. He's being shown the worship of heaven.

[3 : 52] Now, there's not a lot of dispute about worship nowadays. There are those who want to confine it to what we do when we meet together, and more specifically, to confine it to singing.

I love singing. I love music. I would be deprived without it. But please, don't let's imagine that we are worshipping when we are singing, and not worshipping, for example, when we're listening to the Word of God, or praying to Him.

You can be absolutely certain that if someone calls themselves a director of worship, what they really mean is that they lead the music group. Music is part of worship.

Worship must never be collapsed into it. There are those, on the other hand, who tell us that worship is everything we do with our daily lives. Present your bodies a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable worship.

That comes close to saying that the only time we don't worship is when we meet together. The truth of the matter is both things are true. We need to worship God with our daily lives.

[4 : 53] We need these times when together, as it were, it's concentrated. Rather like in human relationships, you need special times, you need holidays, you need romantic dinners and those sorts of things.

And we must see worship on earth. Not primarily in terms of these two poles, but in terms of what is happening in heaven. One of the reasons, surely, for these chapters is to tell us about the church triumphant worshipping in heaven.

These chapters belong together. And especially the two songs here, the songs of worship, Worthy are you, O Lord and God, and worthy are you to take the scroll.

And we're going to look at these two themes. The great themes at the heart of the gospel, The sovereign God is praised for creation in chapter 4, and the saviour is praised for redemption.

These are the two great themes. What is heaven singing about? What is heaven occupied with? It's occupied with the creator and with the redeemer. So, first of all then, The sovereign is praised for creation.

[6 : 03] And the first thing that John sees in heaven is a throne. Verse 3, verse 2, sorry. At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.

The throne is mentioned more than 40 times in the book of Revelation. That's surely significant. And that's why I read from Isaiah 6 at the beginning, because a great deal of the language used here recalls Isaiah's earlier vision of the Lord seated on his throne.

What is the reality behind all the other realities? Whatever else is happening, wherever we may be, what is the ultimate reality? John says ultimate reality is there is a throne in heaven.

There is a higher throne, as we sang a moment or two ago. The Lord reigns. That's the ultimate reality. Richard, very helpfully at the prayer meeting on Wednesday evening, pointed that out in his exposition of Psalm 93.

The Lord reigns. And it's not the Lord reigning in a peaceful scene. It's the Lord reigning above the raging waters, above the torrents, and above the chaos. So, who is reigning?

[7 : 14] Who is reigning in Patmos? Who is reigning in Ephesus and Laodicea and all these other places? And John is saying, it's not the emperor. It's not any past, present, or future regime.

It is the Lord, God himself, the one who was and who is, and who is to come, is reigning. Now you'll notice there is no attempt to describe God himself, the figure of the one seated on the throne.

Rather, we have a series of pictures, a series of glimpses of the otherness and the holiness of God. The throne stood in heaven.

Verse 3, He who sat there, the appearance of Jasper, Cornelian. In other words, the precious stones reflecting light. Now John, of course, in his first letter, had said that in more straightforward language.

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. During this wonderful rite of poetic images, God is shining in brilliance. Terrifying.

[8 : 19] But notice what else is around the throne. At the end of verse 3, around the throne was a rainbow. That takes us right back to the beginning, the covenant with Noah.

Right at the beginning, after the flood, God setting his bow in the sky as a sign that he would keep his covenant and keep faith. So you see, although there is the otherness, the terrifying nature, the holiness of God, the emerald stands there or shines there as a reminder.

And from the, and around the throne are a number of worshippers. Heaven is not empty. There are different circles, rather like, rather like a stone dropped in a pool and the ripples widening further and further outwards.

Now, once again, there are differences of opinion as about who these people are who are around the throne. Verse 4, 24 elders clothed in white garments with golden crowns on their heads.

Now, some argue they are a kind of exalted order of angels. Once again, I'm not wishing to be dogmatic, but it does seem to me that it's more likely this is the people of God in every generation, the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles, because that happens at the end in the heavenly city.

[9 : 42] This number 12, number of the completeness of God's people, and later on, when we come to the mysterious number, 144,000, then we'll find this helpful.

And again, in chapter 7, which you read from earlier, we find the people of God, we find the people of God in multiples of 12. Now, that tells us something rather important, I think.

This is a scene that's actually happening now. As John looked into heaven, this was a reality. As we read what John says thousands of years later, it's a reality.

But it was also a reality in the past. And yet, it's a reality. It's only finally going to be fulfilled in the future when all of God's people are gathered into his presence.

I think that's very important as we're interpreting Revelation. Remember, we mustn't try and pin things down to absolute chronology. John is not giving us a chronological sequence.

[10 : 43] John is saying to us, if you could see into heaven, this is what you would see. This is what it's like now, and even more so on the last day. And the reason I think the 24 elders are God's people, they are clothed in white garments.

And that's used later on about God's people. The white garments are the righteousness of the saints, clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own, as Wesley sings.

And the gold crowns speak of their reigning with Christ. But that, like the rainbow, takes us right back to the beginning. What were humans created for?

They were created to be God's vice-regents and to rule over the earth. As we'll see later on, God has never repealed that early purpose. That remains God's purpose.

Not just individual redemption, but the redemption of the whole universe, the new heaven and the new earth, over which redeemed humanity will reign. When God sets out his purpose, he does not change it.

[11 : 53] And so here, I want to suggest that this is a reference to God's people. And then verse 5, a reference probably to Mount Sinai, God appearing on Sinai and reminding us again of the big story.

And notice the seven spirits of God, which I suggested last week, is a reference to the Holy Spirit in the fullness of his power and the fullness of his presence.

So around the throne of God in heaven, worship his people of all generations. He worshiped there now. And as we sing on earth, I mean, notice the point of the last hymn we sang.

Sing in blessed anticipation, worthy the Lamb, through the veil of tribulation. Another hymn, speak this up as well, the hymn for all the saints who from their labors rest.

We feebly struggle, they in glory shine. So we are part of this and one day we'll be fully part of it. The living creatures, the lion, the ox, the face of a man and like an eagle, I think they represent the whole created order.

[13 : 03] For very often apocalyptic is the number of the whole earth. And we still use the phrase the four corners of the earth. You get this, for example, in Psalm 148, Praise him shining stars, praise him sun and moon, praise him hail and snow.

This is not nature worship. This is creation worshiping its creator. Then again in Isaiah 6, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is filled with his glory. Because worship is the gateway into heaven. So what you, you know, think about it for a moment. How does creation worship its creator?

As C.S. Lewis says somewhere that creation, first of all, worships its creator by being a good example of what it was created to be. A tree worships God by being a tree and so on.

Now, even in this fallen world, particularly on a beautiful day like this, we can see the goodness and the wonder of creation. And the gospel story tells us that one day the redeemed creation will join with redeemed humanity and with the angels in heaven as they worship God and the Lamb.

[14 : 17] So, we have this glimpse of these circles of worship surrounding the throne. And notice what the living creatures say, verse 8, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come.

And then we have the first of the great songs, the song of creation, verse 11, Worthy are you, O Lord and God, to receive glory, honour, and power.

Now, as John's first readers heard these words, they would know exactly what John was meaning. I said this morning that the Emperor Domitian, in whose reign this book was almost certainly written, introduced the Emperor cult, which effectively meant a worship of the Emperor.

And as the Emperor came in procession, the crowds said to him, Worthy are you. You can see what's happening here.

John is saying, all over the Roman Empire, people are talking to this mere human being and saying, Worthy are you. He does not deserve this. Worthy are you to receive glory, honour, and power.

[15 : 31] It doesn't mean that God doesn't have these things already, and that our praise is going to give it to him. What it means is that God already has these things and they need to be acknowledged.

And notice the content of worship. It's often important when we sing. We sing songs and hymns with content in them, not just feelings, because a lot of people learn their theology from hymns and songs.

People remember the hymns and they've forgotten the sermon. That's why it's so important that we sing songs that will help people. I mean, after all, that's why Charles Wesley wrote so many of his hymns, to teach people scripture and to teach people the great doctrines of the gospel.

Why is the Lord God worthy? For he created all things. The most fundamental truth about God is that he is the creator.

He is the living God. And without him, the universe would be dead and dark, like the dark side of the moon. Not only that, he created for a purpose.

[16 : 35] By your will, they existed and were created. Fundamental truth that God did not create just because he enjoyed creating. He created for a purpose.

And that purpose is that one day the whole of the universe will ring with praise, saying, Worthy are you, O Lord our God. So the great song of creation, one of the great themes of the gospel.

And we must never lose hold of this great theme of the gospel. God is the creator. And God is the one who will make the new creation. And now comes a kind of break, almost, in this great drama in heaven.

Verse 2, Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals? That's where we come on to the second great theme, the theme of redemption. And notice this scroll is sealed with seven seals.

Once again, that shows its comprehensiveness. I've said often, seven is the number of comprehensiveness. In the next chapter, we're going to see a series, a three series of sevenfold judgments.

[17 : 54] But the universe, as it were, holds its breath. And we can understand this. We look out on this glorious creation that God has made.

We look out on the many wonderful things he has given us, the many enjoyable times he gives us. Then other times, the sky turns grey, doesn't it? Creation looks ugly.

Life looks bleak and barren. And we ask the question, How are we going to make it? Is it going to work out? Is it all going to be a failure?

And you can see the whole universe is holding its breath as the strong angel, perhaps Gabriel himself, proclaims with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?

The scroll is the scroll of human history, of God's purposes throughout history. And notice the challenge throughout the whole creation. No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll.

[18 : 57] And let's just raise a look into it. No one without revelation is ever going to understand what God's purposes in history are. We can understand bits and pieces, but the final purpose, why is there a creation?

Why is history going on? Someone needs to reveal it to us. And John weeps. He weeps because he's terrified that God's purposes will not be fulfilled.

And one of the elders said to me, Weep no more. The line of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered. So much Old Testament in all this. The line of Judah mentioned in Genesis 49.

The root of David, the shoot of David mentioned in Isaiah 11. The very center of history. And then there's this paradox.

The lion, who is also the lamb. Now Revelation is full of these mixed metaphors, full of these paradoxes, because only by doing so can it draw attention to two things.

[20 : 02] First of all, human beings on the whole think we cannot do anything unless we have power. Military power, political power, financial muscle, and so on.

In other words, we need the lion. On the other hand, the lamb represents weakness, suffering, all the kind of things we don't want to happen and all the kind of things that are devalued.

Here's what John is saying here. The lion, by dying and suffering as the lamb, has fully carried out the purpose of God.

It's not, you see, it's not ultimately that there are two kinds of power. One which is established by force, by brutality, and by diktat, and another type which is established through suffering.

The point is that this suffering of the lamb is the only true power. Remember back in Philippians 2, he humbled himself, therefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name.

[21 : 10] And John the Baptist, of course, addresses him in John's Gospel as, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. A lamb standing as though it had been slain.

Remember the hymn, Crown Him the Lord of Love. Behold His hands and side, those wounds yet visible above in beauty glorified. That comes from here.

I mean, there were so many hymns we could have sung tonight, there dozens of others because this has been, as I say, such a fruitful source of hymnody and songwriting. But let's never fall into the trap that many modern theologians do of talking about the vulnerable God who isn't actually able to carry out His purpose.

This suffering lamb, looking as if He had been slain, is still the line. Seven horns. A horn is the sign of power. And seven horns is the sign of total, complete power.

And the seven eyes, the eyes representing looking at the whole purpose of history, the whole sweep of history. Back in chapter one, the first vision, His eyes, His eyes were like a flame of fire.

[22 : 25] And notice as well, He is the giver of the Spirit, the seven spirits of God. He is the lamb, the lion. He is the giver of the Spirit.

And He went and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who was seated on the throne. Now, that's what we've read about the throne, about its awesomeness, about its otherness, about its distance, which is probably what the crystal sea represents.

that this one can go straight up to the throne and take the scroll. Tells us that this is someone who is equal with God Himself. He takes the scroll because of His death and His resurrection.

Remember we sang earlier on, history itself belongs to you. And that's what's happening here. And when He had taken the scroll, once again there is worship in heaven, a heart, golden bowls, full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

We'll come to that next week, but just in passing, doesn't it show how important the prayers of God's people are, even in heaven itself? Bowls of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

[23 : 34] Tremendous importance of praise. Now, as the worshippers had fallen before the one who sits on the throne, now they worship the Lamb. Verse 9. Worthy are you.

Now, a new song, phrase often used in the psalm, sing to the Lord, a new song. Psalm 98, verse 1. New mercies, but here it is the song of the new covenant, the new blessings that the death of Christ has opened.

Opening the kingdom of heaven to all who believe, the sacrifice that made it all possible. And notice too, once again, we've noticed how we're drawing from deep wells of the Bible.

Every tribe, language, people, and nation. The ancient promise to Abraham in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed and they shall reign on the earth.

Notice that we come later on to the new creation. The Bible does not see the new creation as disembodied existence in a shadowland.

[24 : 43] It sees it as a glorious psalm, as a glorious life with the Lord in a totally physical and totally redeemed universe where, quote C.S. Lewis, again, the sky is bluer and the grass is greener, a deeper country.

So the song of creation and the song of redemption parallel each other. The purpose of God from the beginning was to create a heaven and an earth in which righteousness dwells.

The danger of that being completely set aside which came in through sin and the fall and the activity of Satan. That has been, that great tragedy has been dealt with by the death on the cross and therefore singing the song of redemption.

Now you notice the climax in verses 11 to 14. How the praise moves out in ever-widening circles. I heard around the throne the living creatures, the elders, the voices of many angels.

Once again, the angels now in heaven, they haven't been particularly mentioned before, but now they join in worship. And notice once again, you are worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.

[26 : 00] These are not qualities he doesn't have. These are qualities, recognition of who he is and what he's done. And that, and the worship is joined by the entire created order.

Verse 13, I heard every creature in heaven and earth, under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them saying, and this is the fulfilment, as I say, of the, of these glorious psalms that speak about the created order, praising the Lord, praising the Lord without any imperfection, without any disease and without any decay.

And notice how verse 13 goes on, to him who sits on the throne, and this significant detail added, and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever.

We cannot praise God without praising the Lamb. Just as John has said in his gospel, no one comes to the Father but by me. So we've got a kind of faith that says I worship God but I don't believe in Jesus.

And it's not a truly biblical and gospel faith. We worship God truly by the Spirit, in his Spirit, and the Spirit's task is always to exalt the Son.

[27 : 29] And the living creature said Amen, the elders fell down and worshipped. The worship of heaven, the worship of the one to whom history belongs.

And who does history belong to? Does it belong to some impersonal bureaucracy? Does it belong to some ruthless tyrant? It belongs to none of those things. It belongs to the good shepherd who gave his life for the sheep.

It belongs to the Lamb who was slain. In heaven there is not only the power and might and glory of the one who was and is and is to come.

But in heaven there is a Redeemer. And that Redeemer is our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Let's pray. God our Father as we have had this glimpse of further up and further in the wonderful worship of heaven.

Help us not only as we sing but as we live our lives. Help us to hear behind the noises and cacophony often of earth to hear the sound of the music of that glorious place and to be encouraged and strengthened as we continue to run the race.

[28 : 47] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.