

The Revelation of Jesus Christ: a study for fellowship groups

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Part 3: The Scene in Heaven (Rev 4:1 - 5:14) published 10/09/2003

Read Revelation chapters 4 & 5 right through

We are now moving on from the first section of the book, Christ in the midst of the Church (chs 1-3), to the second and longest section, Christ on the Throne (chs 4-16). Of necessity we can only spend limited time looking at what these chapters tell us. The scene now changes. The book of Revelation is like a four-scene play. This is scene 2. The backdrop has changed from earth to heaven. John, "in the Spirit" (4:2) as he describes himself in connection with each scene, is beckoned into the theatre where the curtain has risen, through an open door (4:1) that leads to the edge of the stage. It may be helpful to use imagination to try to picture the scene, but quite unhelpful to imagine we have worked out what heaven is like! The picture teaches principles. It is not *virtual reality*.

This is heaven revealed (albeit in apocalyptic picture language like the rest of the book) while events on earth are coming to a climax. Try to picture the scene. John sees the throne where God is seated and surrounding it he sees four circles. And this is what the account contains (working outwards):

- o The Throne (4:2) Centre stage is the throne with the Father ("the one who sat there" 4:3), the Son ("the Lion of the tribe of Judah" 5:5), and the Holy Spirit ("the seven spirits of God" 4:5, 5:6).
- o The first circle – The Living Creatures (4:6). God has with him at the side of the throne these ambassadors of life on earth of various sorts (actually, they were 'Cherubim'). More than that however, these represent the testimony of the word of God through the Gospel writers:
 - Matthew - portraying Christ as Lion (king of animals), symbol of kingship. Matthew presents Jesus as King
 - Mark - portraying Christ as Ox (the servant animal), symbol of his perfect servanthood. Mark presents Jesus as the Servant
 - Luke - portraying Christ as Human, and being the perfect human being. Luke teaches relationship and presents Jesus as the Perfect Human Being
 - John - portraying Christ as Eagle (the creature of the heavens), symbol of deity. John presents Jesus as Son of God
- o The Sea (4:6) The rest of the company are separated by a sea of glass. When God presenced himself among his people in the O.T. days of the tabernacle/temple there were two barriers in place. There was the curtain (Ex 26:31-34 and symbolically torn during the crucifixion Mt 27:51) and there was the bronze basin containing water for washing (Ex 30:18-21). Now the curtain is gone but expanse of water, now a solid sea, remains.

Q1 There must always be distance between Creator and Creature. At Bethlehem the Creator became Creature, but the Creature never becomes Creator. Do members of the group agree with this principle, and is it right to envisage the principle at work in eternity?

- o The second circle – The 24 Elders (4:4) These represent the people of God – possibly those already passed on from life on earth. One can infer that the 12 tribes of the O.T. and the 12 apostles of the N.T. are in mind, but there are other explanations. What they do is more important than what they are. They are themselves on thrones and wearing crowns, which shows that they occupy positions of honour and of responsibility.
- o The third circle – The Angels (5:11)

o The fourth circle – The whole of creation (6:13) The worship engaged in looks toward that time when all of creation will acknowledge Jesus (Philippians 2:11)

Q2 We are created by the direct will of God (4:11; Ps 139:13; Jn 1:12-13; 1 Pe 1:23), not by some wilful human act, and it is by the will of God that our lives are sustained (4:11; Col 1:17). Discuss in the group how this understanding should modify our understanding of things like unwanted pregnancies, refugees, natural disasters etc (the obvious ones like abortion and euthanasia are best left out in the interests of time). Don't rush this ... it is radically important for the Christian.

Read again Rev 4:9-5:5

What is this scroll (*book* in some versions) that is in God's hand. Coming immediately after the words about God's will, it seems obviously to be "The will of God for the destiny of the Human Race". It used to be thought that the earth is at the centre of the universe, or that the Sun is, at least. In fact our Sun is an insignificant star in an unimportant galaxy somewhere out on the side of the universe. What makes earth important, let alone you and me, is not the astronomical significance of earth but the significance that God attaches to it ... and to us. He has reminders of the life of earth before him around his throne. And he has visited the planet (5:6)! He has bought back at huge price those who dwell on earth from the hopeless condition which sin has got them into. Only he, therefore, is worthy to break open the statements about the will of God in the destiny of mankind and set the events in train (5:5).

Q3 Has our self esteem and our sense of the importance of what goes on in the world taken on a new dimension because we have come to see how important we and it are in God's eyes?

For Lion read Lamb! Right at the beginning of our study of the book of revelation we learned that in spiritual warfare the weapons needed are not swords or guns but prayer, blood and the word of testimony. Jesus had all of these. One of the elders pointed John to the Lion, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, but when he looked what he saw was not a lion but a Lamb and one bearing the appearance of having been slain (5:6)! The greatest strength in the universe is the strength of a lamb!

When the 24 elders stooped to worship their crowns must have fallen off! How appropriate as they come to worship! They come "holding golden bowls which are the prayers of the saints, bowls full of incense (5:8)". The order has been changed to show that it is the bowls which are the prayers and the incense which is added (the intercession of the Holy Spirit and of the Son). Our prayers are very important to God!

Q4 How importantly do we value prayers, however poor in words we are? Do we see how importantly God views them?

Optional section In a way which is difficult to show without all of the following references to work through, the wrath which is poured out in the prophecy of this book is something which is invoked both by the unfolding of the will of God as written down on the scroll (6:1-12; 8:1) and by the prayers of the saints represented by the bowls (first containing prayers 5:8 then full of God's wrath 15:7; 16:1-17). It is not an unending wrath, but one which has a start (6:17), a period of happening (16:1,19) and an end (15:1), when God and his people have been vindicated.