

Glory to God the Creator

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[0 : 0 0] So the plan for this week and next week is to look through kind of these pair of chapters in Revelation, chapter 4 this week, chapter 5 next week. And then after that, we're going to get back into Mark's gospel that we began sort of almost a year ago, and we're going to pick up and look at the second half of that.

But why are we looking at these two chapters in Revelation at the moment? Let me just kind of quickly say why I think these are really relevant chapters to us today and at all times, great chapters to look at together.

I think one of the key characteristics of the time that we're living in is probably fair to say we're living in a time of change and uncertainty. So if you follow the news, you'll know in the last couple of weeks we've had a new prime minister and cabinet to try and deal with Brexit.

Finally, who knows what is going to happen there? Who knows how long that will go on for? Further afield, there's been protests going on in Hong Kong against the Chinese government for the last nine weeks.

Nobody really knows how things are going to end up there, whether things are going to escalate. It seems that kind of the American presidential race is somehow, it feels like it only finished a couple of weeks ago, it's starting again.

[1 : 1 5] Who knows how that is going to end up, what the consequences of that will be. But perhaps this morning, those things all seem a little bit distant and far away.

Perhaps actually this morning, we've all got more pressing things on our minds. Our oldest daughter starts school in a week and a half. We wonder how she'll settle in, who will she meet, who she's going to spend the next seven years of her life with.

Perhaps you're heading back to a new year at school. Perhaps you're heading back even to a new school. Perhaps you've got a change in job. Perhaps there's general kind of uncertainty in your employment.

Perhaps there are things going on in your family. There are tons and tons of things for all of us where there is uncertainty, where there is change, where we don't know what the result is going to be.

Maybe someone linked to an article on the Guardian website this week and the kind of conclusion almost of the article, it was a review of a book, but the conclusion really was to say this, no one knows what the future will look like, so we'd better keep an open mind and hope for the best.

[2 : 2 4] Apparently he was a very intelligent guy, although that to me kind of sounds like a highbrow version of that keep calm and carry on that you see on tea towels. But basically that's the world's approach, isn't it?

You know, things are out of our control, but just crack on, just hope for the best. Well, the book of Revelation and these two chapters that we're going to be looking at this week and next week, right at the end of the Bible, is really written for situations like this.

What do we need to know? What does the Bible tell us as we look to deal with times of change and uncertainty? Well, Revelation really kind of gives us a kind of a look behind the curtain, as it were, at the true situation of the world that we live in.

Often people think that Revelation is all kind of a book about the future, what's going to happen. It's actually much more a book about the present, what is happening. What is happening in the very real, but unseen, spiritual realm of the world that we live in.

And ultimately it shows us this, that God rules. God rules. So Revelation agrees that it says, yeah, there are all sorts of things out of our control. There are all sorts of things that we don't know how those things are going to end up.

[3 : 40] But Revelation, the Bible as a whole, gives us a hope which isn't just, well, let's hope for the best. Which isn't just, let's keep calm and carry on. But which is a certain hope because God is in control.

In fact, the whole book is a letter that is written to churches who are going through really tough times. They're facing all sorts of challenges and uncertainties. If you'd turn back into chapter 2 and chapter 3, that's what that's all about.

But then the point of chapter 4 that begins, as Simon read it, after this, the point of chapter 4 and then chapter 5 is to say in the midst of these difficult times, don't worry.

Don't despair. Don't give up. God is in control. God rules. And God is good. So let's look at this chapter together. There's two halves, really, in the chapter.

Firstly, we see the heavenly throne is kind of the first focus. And then the second half, the second focus, is the heavenly worship. So let's dig in to those two. Verses 1 down to 6, John gives us this picture of the heavenly throne.

[4 : 48] Throughout the Bible, the throne, as it is today, I suppose, is a symbol of power and authority. Kings are seated on their thrones. And yet this isn't an earthly throne showing rule or control over a particular country or region.

This is the heavenly throne showing rule and control over all things. One writer describes this scene as the control room at supreme headquarters. It's kind of like mission control for the whole universe.

And the key thing about this throne is that it is not empty. Verse 2, Behold, a throne stood in heaven with one seated on the throne.

Julie's gran was always a bit of a character and used to get into all sorts of kind of unlikely scrapes for a woman that old. But she used to tell a story about how one time her and her friend were invited to Buckingham Palace really as a thank you for some, along with a number of other people, as a thank you for some charity work that they'd done.

And Julie's gran and her friend somehow managed to separate themselves from the crowd, from the tour, from where they were supposed to be, basically, and found their way into a very large room with two very grand thrones at one end of it.

[6 : 06] And as you naturally would, they thought that this looks like a great place to have a seat, take the weight off your feet, have a bit of a rest. And so they did, until they got disturbed very rudely by some palace guards who probably were kind of armed to the teeth and made it clear that actually these seats were not for them.

They were not supposed to be there. Well, actually, what John gives us in this chapter is an incredible picture of God and his throne. And it's clear that God is supposed to be there.

This is his throne. He does deserve to sit on it. That's an incredible description. It's worth just noting, before we look at it in a bit more detail, this isn't something that you can draw out.

You can kind of put your sketch pads away if you brought them along. This will be something kind of weird and confusing looking. But the way that John describes this is really kind of picking up various images which speak about the presence of God, the power of God, the glory of God.

And lots of them from the Old Testament, from before Jesus was born. But all these different images and just kind of piling them one on top of the other to give this incredible picture.

[7 : 15] And so we see in verse 3 these precious stones of jasper and carnelian and an emerald that show us God's beauty and his majesty. There is a rainbow. It's there to remind us of God's covenant, his promise to Noah that he is a God who will judge the wicked but will protect and deliver his people.

There is lightning and thunder in verse 5. That's how one of the prophets of the Old Testament, a guy called Ezekiel, described God's throne. It's also a reminder of God's presence at Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus.

As God gives his law to his people, they're terrified because of this thunder and lightning that surrounds the mountain. And then John goes on to describe seven torches of fire which are the seven spirits of God.

It's talking there about the Holy Spirit which in the previous chapters of Revelation has been introduced as providing for the church, as empowering the church, as bringing the church's needs before God.

And finally, verse 6, before the throne there was, as it were, a sea of glass like crystal. And really, that's there to show really the separation that there is between God and everything else.

[8 : 30] That he is completely holy. That he is completely set apart. He is completely pure. That he alone deserves to be seated on this heavenly throne.

We could spend all morning, we could spend the next, you know, three months kind of looking at each one of these kind of images in detail trying to pick out where's John getting this from, what's it about.

But really, the big picture is this that John is trying to say. He's trying to tell these churches who he's writing to. He's trying to tell us this morning this is the big picture.

This is the God who you know. John is saying who is the one who's seated on this heavenly throne? It's the God of the Old Testament that the people knew.

It's the God who judges the wicked but makes promises to his people. It's that same powerful, dangerous, beautiful, holy God that we find in the pages of the Bible.

[9 : 30] He's the one who's sitting on the heavenly throne. Everything that happens is happening under his control. There is nothing that is too big or too difficult.

There is nothing that is too small or too insignificant for him to be interested in, for him to handle. He is completely in control, completely sovereign. He rules.

They used to say about Alex Ferguson when he was at Man United that nothing happened from the very top to the very bottom without Alex Ferguson's say-so and without his knowledge. He used to meet and get to know the parents of the youth team players.

He would also choose who they were going to spend millions and millions of pounds on as a new signing. There's a great story about how apparently he turned up at one late night party to drag Ryan Giggs home and tell him that that was not the kind of behavior that was acceptable.

He seemed to know everything people said, everything that was going on. He ruled over everything. Manchester United for that kind of period of time was his domain and it worked.

[10 : 36] We see here that God's domain is the entire universe. Nothing is going on behind his back. Nothing is catching him by surprise. He is sitting in his glory on that heavenly throne.

So let's just stop and kind of think about that for a minute. Take that in for a minute. I want you to suppose just to take a few seconds to bring to mind whatever is the biggest worry that is playing on your heart right now.

And I'm guessing it's probably not Brexit. It's probably not Hong Kong. It's probably something much more personal. Just think of those things. That thing. Think of those things.

There could be lots of things going on. And we see this incredible picture in Revelation chapter 4. The message is that God is on his throne. That whatever we're thinking of, whatever that kind of silence brings to mind, that God is in control of that situation.

And that does not mean simple solutions. But that does mean that we don't despair. That God is in control. We so easily tend to think that everything depends on us.

[11 : 48] We so easily put ourselves on the throne that we have to be in control. It all comes down to what we can do. This passage is really humbling that actually we're not on the throne but actually really encouraging that that's not the case because God's on the throne.

And God is sovereign even over the most difficult, complex, secret areas of our life. And he is in control of everything else. And so this verse, I think, it makes huge difference to our own kind of personal lives.

But before we move on, it's really helpful to remember as well that this is a letter written to struggling churches. The book of Revelation is addressed to these churches. Churches that didn't look that impressive.

Churches that faced challenges from the outside and also kind of pressure from the inside. Churches that looked very kind of average. Churches that were struggling. It's to these churches that this vision gives great comfort.

It's to the church it's to God's people that this vision says, look, your God reigns. Your God is in control. It might not always look like that. You might feel weak.

[12 : 56] You might feel helpless. You might feel powerless. But God remains on his throne. That was the encouragement for those struggling churches that John wrote to.

And it's an encouragement to us today, isn't it? It's because of God's control that the church both then and now doesn't shrink back, doesn't give up, doesn't despair.

But instead, we're able to move forward. And we might think that the church in Scotland is massively struggling and we have to be realistic about what the state of the church is.

And there might well be places where the church seems to be kind of getting shut out of our culture. There may be views that Christians hold which are no longer acceptable in polite society.

But when we see all of these things in light of Revelation chapter 4, we see we don't need to despair and retreat. That doesn't mean that everything has gone wrong. Actually, we're able to go forward because God is in control.

[13 : 57] And it's because of that that the church is uniquely able to offer peace and security in a world full of change and uncertainty and all the stress and the worry that comes with that.

the church is uniquely able to offer that assurance because of the message that God is on the throne. It's done in his strength and it's done by pointing others to him who rules.

So God is seated on the heavenly throne. God is in control. Well, the second half of this passage, we move from the heavenly throne to the heavenly worship. Really, the response to this God.

We mentioned that God is the only one on the throne. But around the throne, as we read through, we see it's kind of teeming with life. This heavenly host is present and what are they doing?

They're worshipping the God who's on the throne. So who's there? Again, as we read through this, some of this can sound a bit strange but we'll just kind of unpack it to try and get the big idea of what John's talking about.

[15 : 00] Verse 4, that around his throne were 24 thrones and seated and seated on the thrones were 24 elders clothed in white garments with crowns on their heads. So who are these guys?

Well, throughout the book of Revelation, the number 24, it pops up quite a lot. And that's really because it represents the whole of God's people. The idea is it's the 12 tribes of Israel from the Old Testament.

It's the 12 apostles who are the foundation of the church in the New Testament, 12 out of 12, 24. And so the idea here is that all of God's people throughout all the ages are represented in his presence.

But it's not just these 24 elders who are around the throne. And we also read the second half of verse 6 into verse 7 that there are four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind.

The first living creature like a lion. The second living creature like an ox. The third living creature with the face of a man. The fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And again, don't try and draw these creatures kind of animals covered in eyes.

[16 : 05] It's all a bit kind of strange. It's all symbolism. But what these represent really is kind of the whole of creation. All that God's made that the lion, the human, the ox, the eagle represented the pinnacle of the different types of creature that the people saw in the world around them.

And so the idea here is that we have all of God's people and all of God's creation represented before God's heavenly throne. And what are they doing? Well, they're worshipping him.

And we see that the heavenly worship that goes on around this throne toward the God who sits on the throne. Let me read again verses 8 down to 11.

And 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.

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne who lives forever and ever, the 24 elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever.

[17 : 20] They cast their crowns before the throne saying, 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.

The response of this assembly representing God's people and representing the whole of God's creation as they see the almighty sovereign God seated on his throne is this unending cycle of worship.

worship. It goes on and on and on as they recognize this incredible God who they are seeing can never be over-worshipped, can never be worshipped enough.

They never get to that stage where they say, well, I think you've had enough worship for now, God, I'm going to take a seat, that'll do. No, instead they keep on seeing new kind of facets of his holiness, new aspects of his perfection, new parts of his glory that begin this cycle of worship over and over again.

And why is that? Why are they worshipping? Why does God deserve our worship? Well, we're given a few kind of highlights in these verses that he is holy, holy, holy, holy.

[18 : 37] And that means that he is perfect, powerful, almighty. It means that he's able to handle the responsibility of controlling all things. He's not in over his depth.

He is eternal. He is the one who was and is and is to come. His control always has been and always will be, will never come to an end. And ultimately, he is the one who made all things.

Now, this world, this universe, it is not something that God found or inherited. It's something that he made. It demonstrates his complete control and power over it.

It is his. He's the creator God. And the word worship in our English translations, it comes from kind of the old English worth-ship.

Really, it means kind of what do we give ultimate worth to? Well, these verses are showing us that God is the one thing, the one person of ultimate worth.

[19 : 39] He is therefore that the one person who deserves our worth-ship, our worship. Speaking to someone recently who really kind of struggled with this idea of worship.

Why would God want our worship? Is God some kind of megalomaniac? And it's true, isn't it? If I started saying to you, well, I think maybe at the beginning of church you could have a bit of time where you all sort of bow down before me and just worship me.

You know, maybe just fall on your faces as I enter the room. You know, not for long, something like that. That would be great. You'd think I'd totally lost the plot. And you'd be right. That would not be an appropriate response to who I am or whatever I might like to think from time to time.

That wouldn't be an appropriate response to anyone in this room. But the point is that God does deserve that worship. That God is worth that.

That he is the holy God. He is the God who created everything. And actually, even more than that, we see that this worship is not solely for God's benefit. The author C.S. Lewis, he writes about praise, about how worship of something, if something deserves that worship, it is not a drag.

[20 : 49] It is not a hardship. It is not something we have to force ourselves to do. But it is the ultimate stage of enjoying that thing. We worship what we love. Revelation showed us there is only one thing, only one person that deserves that worship and it is God.

It is as we give our lives in worship to God that we truly enjoy him, that we truly reap the benefits of that relationship with him that he has made possible through Jesus.

We looked before summer at the New City Catechism. There is another much older historic catechism called the Westminster Catechism and it begins like this, question one. What is the chief end of man?

Really, what is the purpose of man? What are we here for? And the answer given is this, to glorify God and enjoy him forever. And they put this idea of glorifying, of worship, together with this idea of enjoying God because that is how we enjoy God.

We give him and only him the ultimate worth in our lives. A life worshipping God means that things are in the right order.

[21 : 59] It means that we're living as we're designed to live. It is life as it works best. It is enjoying that relationship with God. During the time that John wrote this book of Revelation, it is the Apostle John who wrote it.

It is reckoned that the dating of Revelation means that the emperor was a man named Domitian. Domitian was an emperor who demanded that he was worshipped.

He actually gave himself the Latin title Dominus a Deus Noste. If your Latin is a bit rusty, that means our Lord and our God. That's what he called himself. That's what he wanted other people to call himself.

I don't think modesty wasn't particularly high on his agenda, but he demanded the people's worship. In fact, one of the reasons that the church of the day was under pressure is that they would not give him that worship.

And we see why that is in verse 11. Because it's only the one seated on the throne who deserves that worship. It's only that the God of the Bible who can have that title.

[23 : 04] Worthy are you, our Lord and our God to receive glory and honour and power. Here's the true God. Here's the one who deserves to be worshipped.

And while emperor worship was forced upon their subjects, what was joining in the true worship of God is a joy. And really, that's one of the big kind of applications, big reminders, big kind of takeaway points of this passage, both to its original readers and to us as well.

Perhaps we like to be told things we can go and do, boxes we can tick, yet kind of completed Revelation chapter 4. Actually, this is a chapter which is here just to kind of expand our view of God and to remind us again of his power, of his majesty, that he is the eternal sovereign creator.

And that in light of that, what's our response? Well, we're to worship him. We're to value him above everything else. That really sounds very simple.

Actually, in our day-to-day lives, that can be a real challenge. We don't have emperor worship today. Boris Johnson might do a few strange things over the next weeks and months. I'd be surprised if he tries to adopt the title of our Lord and God.

[24 : 19] It would be kind of one of his wackier things. And yet, we are still drawn to and encouraged and pointed to worship other things. Really to assign ultimate worth, ultimate value to something else.

Perhaps you can kind of know this feeling in your head. If I just have this one thing in place, then I know everything will be okay. God can kind of fit around that. Perhaps for you, you're tempted to say, if I have my health, well then I'll be okay and I'll worship God.

If my family are doing well and everything's right in that area of my life, well then, yeah, then I can worship God. If my exams go well or if I'm succeeding at work and things are going well there, well then, I'll worship God.

And the fact is, actually, that's not worshipping God. And that is worshipping, that is giving ultimate value to these other things. And these other things are not God. These other things are not seated on the throne of heaven.

They are not holy or almighty or eternal or the creator. They do not deserve our worship and most importantly, they won't live up to our worship. They will let us down.

[25 : 31] If we're depending on our family, if we're looking to our health, if number one is our performance at work or school, if it's our popularity that defines us, that we find our hope in, if we're depending on any of those things, then ultimately, we're back to that attitude of just carry on and hope for the best because we don't know what will happen in those things.

They are not certain. They are not eternal. But this passage is here to show us the huge picture of God so that we can say, well, that is who I will worship. That is who I will worship no matter what else is going on in my life.

That is who I will worship no matter what the cost, no matter what other people might say, no matter what those around me are doing, that we might say, worthy are you and you alone, my Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.

And that whatever comes, we would put our trust in God and our worship to God because he is in control and he is good. Ultimately, how do we know that God is good?

Why is it good news that God is seated on the throne rather than ourselves, rather than anything else? Well, we know that the one seated on the throne is good, that he wants the best for us because not only is he the holy creator God, but he is also the gracious, redeeming God.

[26 : 58] God's rule over all creation involves sending his only son, the son he loved to suffer and to die in our place. And so when we look at God seated on the throne, we are not looking at a dictator.

We are looking at a loving heavenly father, at one who it's a joy to serve, at one who it's a joy to worship because we know that through Jesus he delights in us.

He has made it possible for us to draw near that heavenly throne and to worship him. And from that heavenly throne he continues to rule over all things for his glory and for our good.

Amen.