

# Encouragement in God's Control

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]      actually voting for. There's also, of course, major elections in America this year that I'm sure we'll be continuing to hear lots about. There's an election today and next Sunday for the new French Parliament following surprise results in the EU elections a few weeks ago. In so many ways, we are living in a changing and an uncertain time at national and international levels. And so I thought it would be good for us to be able to turn to a part of the Bible, to verses that remind us that in all this change, in all this kind of high level stuff that we might think about, still above all of that, there is a God who is in control, that there is a higher throne, that in all the changes of earthly power that we see around us, that whatever the results of these different elections might be, there is a God who reigns.

So that's one of the reasons I want us to look at this passage, something I hope that will be an encouragement from us. But also, it's probably fair to say, perhaps these political things, as you're sitting here this morning, can seem a bit distant or detached. Maybe you don't feel that engaged or kind of enfranchised by politics at the moment. And I would guess that if we were to go around and honestly and openly share, well, what are our main concerns as we sit here this morning?

What are the things that are playing on our minds and our hearts? Probably for most of them, they would be much more routine, mundane, day-to-day kind of things. It's the start of the summer holidays. For many, that's a good thing. Perhaps for some parents, that can seem to be stretching out for a long time into the distance, and we're not quite sure how we're going to fill all that time.

Or it's the end of a school year, perhaps the end of school itself. That's a big time of change, of adjustment. There might be different teachers, different classes, different all sorts of things coming up next year. Maybe in your work or your career, there is uncertainty. Perhaps there are things happening in your family, maybe illness or a change in life stage for you or for a loved one. There are tons of things always going on in our lives, whether it's uncertainty, whether it's change, where we don't know what the result of these things will be. For all of us, in the big and the small, in the international and the very personal, we need this constant encouragement and this constant reminder of knowing that there is a God who reigns. There is a reason that we can have security even when things are changing and uncertain. And the book of Revelation, right at the end of the Bible, is written really for that very reason. Revelation gives us a look behind the curtain, as it were, to the true situation of the world in which we live. As Ewan was saying, Revelation is a book that both looks forward and promises what's to come in the future, but also by doing that shows us what is true and what is happening in the present. Revelation reveals to us the present reality that God rules.

Revelation says yes to our things outside of our control, and yet it's written to give us hope, not just a kind of a hope for the best or a vague hope, but a certain hope that even though things are beyond our control, that God is in control. It's actually a revelation. Again, we sometimes perhaps forget this. The book of Revelation is actually a letter. It's a letter that was written to churches who were going through really tough times. They were facing all sorts of challenges and uncertainties.

[ 3 : 50 ] We can read all about those in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation. But then the point of chapter 4 here, in chapter 5, we'll look at in a couple of weeks' time, is to say, don't worry, don't despair, don't give up, because God is in control. God rules, and God is good. So let's have a look at these verses, this chapter. We're going to see two things. Firstly, the heavenly throne, and then secondly, we'll see the heavenly worship. So let's have a look at those two elements. First verses 1 down to 6, John gives us this picture of the heavenly throne. The throne in the Bible, and I suppose the throne in everyday life for us as well, is a symbol of power and of authority. Kings sit on thrones.

Rulers sit on thrones. And yet this isn't an earthly throne showing power or control over a particular country or region. This is described to us here, the heavenly throne, showing rule and control over all things. One writer describes this scene as the control room at supreme headquarters. This is kind of like mission control for the whole of the universe, this throne seated here. And the key thing is that this throne is not empty. Have a look at verse 2. It says there, Behold, a throne stood in heaven with one seated on the throne. In this vision that John is shown, and which he is called to record for us and pass on to the church through history, we have this incredible picture of God on his heavenly throne ruling over all things. Before we kind of go through that, it's worth saying that this isn't going to be a description that you can kind of draw out with a pen and pencil. You'd end up with something fairly weird looking and confusing. But the best way of thinking of this description is that John is picking up on various different images and pictures used to speak about the presence and the power and the character of God. And he's just kind of piling these images up, one on top of each other. So do follow through with me in your Bibles as we have a look at these verses. We get these precious stones in verse 3, jasper and carnelian and an emerald, which show God's beauty and his majesty. There's a rainbow there, I think, to remind us right back into the Old Testament of God's covenant with Noah, a reminder that God is the God who will judge the wicked, but who will protect and provide rescue for his people. There's lightning and there's thunder in verse 5. That's how the prophet Ezekiel describes 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. Again, thunder and lightning at the scene. Then there's these seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God. And that there is talking about the Holy Spirit, which in the earlier chapters of Revelation is introduced as providing for the church, as empowering the church, and as bringing the church's needs before God.

And then finally, verse 6, before the throne, there was, as it were, a sea of glass-like crystal. I think here's showing that that separation between God on his throne and everything else.

Again, it's as we saw through the book of Isaiah, God is completely holy, completely set apart. He is perfectly pure. He is the one and the only one who deserves to be seated on this throne. So also incredible images brought together in these few short verses. And we could spend our morning on each one of those images. And there are books and books written about each one of them. But really, we want to get the big picture here. And the big picture that John is trying to paint for these churches he's writing to, and for us this morning, is this, that this is the God of the Bible.

This is the God who is shown to us in Scripture. This is the God who judges the wicked, makes promises to his people. It is that same powerful, dangerous, beautiful, holy God that we've seen as we've looked through the book of Isaiah and as we find throughout the pages of the Bible.

[ 8 : 30 ] And John's point to us this morning is to say that he is the one who is sitting on the heavenly throne. That at times we can feel like things are out of control. It feels like there is no kind of direction in our world. But actually the truth is that everything that happens, happens under his control.

There is nothing too big or too difficult. There is nothing too small or insignificant for God to handle as he sits on the throne. He is completely in control. He is the complete sovereign.

He rules. I saw a documentary about Alex Ferguson quite recently. It was saying how when he was manager at Manchester United that nothing happened from top to bottom without his say-so. So he would get to know the parents of potential youth team players. He'd also choose which signings to spend millions and millions of millions of pounds on. Apparently he once showed up at Ryan Giggs' home and showed up to drag Ryan Giggs' home from a kind of a late night party. A bit embarrassing to have this old guy turn off and take you home. But he kind of reigned. He ruled over everything.

Money United was his domain and for that period it worked. What we are seeing here is that God's domain is the entire universe. In the same way nothing is going on behind his back. There is not a different department that he is not responsible for. There is nothing that is going to catch him by surprise. God is sitting in all his glory on the heavenly throne.

God is going to be in the same way. And so that is good for us to remember. It means we can just stop and do this for a minute which is to take a few seconds just to think about whatever is the biggest worry that is playing on your heart right now. What is it that kind of unknown thing that's happening that you're not sure what's going to happen that is kind of gnawing away at you? It's probably not. As we've said it's probably not big elections. It's probably not some international situation that makes the news. It might be those.

[ 10 : 45 ] It might well be something much more personal. Well the message of this chapter is that God is on the throne and that God is in control of that situation. Whatever that might be for you.

And that doesn't mean simple solutions. That doesn't mean a kind of a quick resolution for everything. But it does mean that we don't need to despair. Because whatever it is that worries us, that first thought in the morning, that last thought at night, God is sovereign and in control over that thing.

We so easily tend to think that everything depends on us. We so easily put ourselves on the throne. We think that we have to be in control. It's all on our shoulders. In a lot of ways it's a prideful thing really, isn't it? Thinking that we're the only people who can deal with all these situations.

It's all down to us. It's actually very humbling to accept that it's God on the throne, not us. And yet as well as humbling, it's written here to us to be incredibly comforting.

Because the reality is that in life we soon realize that we cannot deal with all of these different situations. That is why they gnaw away at us and worry us. And yet the Bible tells us that God can and God reigns. Because God is seated on his throne.

[ 12 : 10 ] And it's a great encouragement to us this week to be bringing before him the things that bring us that anxiety and worry. Because God is sovereign over those things.

And before we move on, it's helpful to remember as well that the revelation is a letter written not just to us as individuals, but actually it's a letter written to struggling churches. A letter written to churches that don't look that impressive. A letter written to churches facing challenges from within and pressure from without. And it's to the church that this vision also gives great comfort. It's to the church that this vision says, look, your God reigns.

It might not always look like that. You might feel weak. You might seem insignificant. But your God is in control. And it's because of that, that control that the church, both then and now today, doesn't need to shrink back. But that we can confidently look to move forward.

We might think the church in Scotland is struggling. We would have very much felt the same if we'd have been in any of these churches that the book of Revelation is written to. Weak and insignificant.

There might be places where the church seems to be getting shut out of our culture. It is the case now as it was the case then. There might be views that Christians hold, which are no longer acceptable in plight to society. Again, that's the same now as it was then.

[ 13 : 37 ] We hear figures of declining church attendance across Scotland. It can be tempting to kind of see those things and despair slightly or think, are we on the losing side here?

And yet when we see those in light of Revelation chapter 4, we see actually we don't need to despair or to retreat or just to kind of hunker down, but actually can go forward with confidence.

Because again, God reigns and the church is uniquely able to offer that peace and security to a world that is full of change and uncertainty and all the stress and the worry that comes with that.

The church is able to offer that hope that the world is needing because of that truth that God is on his throne. Okay, so there's the heavenly throne with God seated on it. It is this picture of glory and control and authority that all belongs to God. It's a great comfort, a great encouragement to us this morning that God reigns.

He reigns over the big international picture of things. He reigns in the small details of your life that will be happening in the next week, month, year. That is good news for us.

[ 14 : 53 ] Good news for us to be able to share with others as well. The heavenly throne and God reigning on that throne right now. And then, well, the second half of the passage then, we see, having seen the heavenly throne, we see the heavenly worship, the response to God as he's seated on his throne.

We see that actually all around the throne is kind of teeming with life as this heavenly host is worshipping God. So who is there? Who's described in this scene? Some of this can sound a bit strange as we read it, but actually as we will be able to kind of unpack it to see who John is speaking about.

And again, do look, have a look down at your Bibles. Do have a look at the passage with me. In verse 4, it says that around the throne were 24 thrones, and seated on the thrones were 24 elders clothed in white garments with crowns on their heads.

Who are these people described here? Well, the number 24 pops up quite a lot in the book of Revelation, and it really represents the whole people of God.

It's kind of the 12 tribes of Israel from the Old Testament, plus the 12 apostles of the New Testament. Those added together, you get 24. So the idea here is that God's people throughout the ages are represented here in his presence.

[ 16 : 18 ] That the rulers over God's people are on kind of sub-thrones, still in the presence of God, worshipping him on the highest of thrones. And yet, not just these 24 elders who are around the throne.

We also read in the second half of verse 6 and 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, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight.

Again, don't try and draw these creatures. They're kind of like animals covered in eyes, a bit of an odd look. But what these represent, and remember this is a vision, so we're dealing in kind of representations and ideas here, is symbolism.

These creatures represent the whole of creation. It's all that God has made. The lion, the human, the ox, the eagle represented kind of the pinnacle, as it were, of the different types of creatures.

And so all of God's people, the 24 on the throne, and all of God's creation, these different animals, are represented before God's heavenly throne.

[ 17 : 30 ] And what are they doing? Well, they are worshipping. We see the heavenly throne, and we see the heavenly worship that goes on around his throne, toward the God who sits on the throne.

Again, let me read verses 8 down to 11. This is one of those passages of the Bible where the passage itself kind of explains it and pictures it and demonstrates it far better than I could.

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

It goes on and on and on, and they recognize this incredible God who they are seeing can never be over-worshipped, could never be worshipped enough. They never get to the stage where they say, Well, that's enough worship for now.

You know, that'll do. It's as if they keep on seeing new facets of his holiness, of his glory. And it kind of triggers this worship to begin all over again.

[ 19 : 24 ] And why is it there? Why is it there worshipping? For us this morning, why does God deserve our worship? For us this morning, why is it there? We see in these verses a few things that he is holy, holy, holy, holy, as it says.

That means he is perfect, powerful, almighty. He is able to handle that responsibility of controlling all things. We read that he is eternal.

He is the one who was and is and is to come. His control always has been and will never come to an end. He is not going to lay that down. He is not going to drop the ball at some point.

We see that he is the one who made all things. This isn't a world that he found or inherited. He created it. It is his design. It belongs to him.

And so he is worthy of our worship. That word, the English word worship, it really comes from the kind of the old English worth-ship.

[ 20 : 26 ] It's about the idea of what do we give ultimate worth to. These verses are showing us that God is the one thing. God is the one person of ultimate worth and therefore deserves our worth-ship, our worship.

Sometimes we perhaps struggle with that idea of worship. You know, why would God want our worship? Or if we turn the tables, you know, if I started saying, you know, I'd like you all to just bow down before me and worship.

Or if you could just fall onto your face when I entered the room. You know, you'd think that I had totally lost the plot on you and you'd be completely right. That's not an appropriate response to who I am.

But the point here that we're seeing in Revelation is that God does deserve that worship. He and he alone deserves that. And actually, even as we come to recognize that, as we come to worship him, that's not only for his benefit, but for us as well.

C.S. Lewis writes about how it's praise, it's the worship of something. If that something deserves worship. It's not a drag. It's not a chore.

[ 21 : 33 ] But it's actually the ultimate stage of enjoying that thing. You know, you see a great goal at the Euros. And you speak about its greatness. Did you see that?

Did you see that? People share it on social media for others to see. They want to enjoy it together. You have a great meal somewhere. You kind of wax lyrical about it.

But the glorying in that is part of the enjoyment of it. The Westminster Catechism famously opens by asking, what is the chief end of man?

Really, what is the purpose of man? What are we here for? What are we designed for? And the answer given, to glorify God and enjoy him forever. And again, right back in the history of theology, that 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, our ultimate worth in our lives. And that can be a challenge. That's a really kind of counter-cultural way to live in a world that often doesn't recognize or have any time for God.

[ 22 : 45 ] But again, this is the same situation in so many ways as when the book of Revelation was written. During that time, as John wrote this book, the Roman emperor was a man called Domitian who demanded that he was worshipped.

He gave himself the Latin title, Dominus Ae Deus Noste. If your Latin is a bit rusty, that means our Lord and our God. He wasn't a kind of a shrinking violet kind of guy.

He demanded the people's worship. One of the reasons that the church was under such pressure in Revelation is that they wouldn't 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 worship. And who can truly have that title. Worthy are you, our Lord and God.

To receive glory and honor and power. Here's the true God. He is the only one to be worshipped. While emperor worship was kind of forced upon his subjects.

[ 23 : 50 ] Joining in this worship of God is to be a joy. And really that's one of the big applications, the big reminders of this passage. Which again, to the original readers, to us as well.

To remind us again of God's power and his majesty. That he is the eternal sovereign creator. And in light of that, that call to worship him.

To give everything to him. To put him above everything else. Not as a chore. But under the recognition that that is the key to fullness in life.

That that is what we were designed for. That is what our ultimate end will be that the revelation is showing us. And that is how we're called to live in the present. In the here and now as well.

And yet, the challenge is that we're still drawn, aren't we? To worship other things. We're still drawn in our present lives to assign ultimate worth.

[ 24 : 48 ] Ultimate value to something else. So long as I have blank, then I'll be okay. Or if I lost blank, life wouldn't be worth living.

However we fill in that blank is ultimately the thing that we are worshipping. That we are giving ultimate allegiance and authority to. If I have my health, well then I'll be okay and I'll worship God.

If my family are doing well, well then I can worship God. If my exams go well or I'm succeeding at work, well then I'll worship God. But ultimately that's not worshipping God.

That is worshipping. That is giving ultimate value to these other things. And the fact is these 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 don't deserve our worship. And they won't live up to our worship. They'll let us down as they're not in control.

[ 25 : 50 ] Just as we will let ourselves down if we put ourselves on that throne. Because we are not in control either. If we are depending on our family, our health, our performance at work or school, our popularity.

If we are depending on any of these things. We are kind of really just on that kind of carry on and hope for the best attitude. The world around us offers. Because we don't know what will happen to any of those things.

They are not certain. They are not at all. But this passage is here to show us a huge picture of God. So that we can say that is the one 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 say. That each of us as individuals might say, Worthy are you and you alone, my Lord and God.

To receive glory and honor and power. Whatever comes, I will worship God because he is in control. And not simply that he is in control, but also that he is good.

[ 26 : 58 ] There have been plenty of tyrants who have claimed ultimate authority for themselves. That was the case in the Roman world. We still see that today. We need one who is not just in control, but one who is also good.

And again, the Bible presents to us a God who is good. How can we know that this powerful, sovereign, ruling 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.

God's rule over all creation involves sending his only son, the son he loved to suffer in our place in order to restore us back to him.

It is not a dictator who is seated on the throne of creation. It is a loving, heavenly father who has opened the way for us to come to him and find security in his good and loving rule.

[ 28 : 07 ] That amazing truth that through Jesus, through trusting in him, through accepting the forgiveness he offers, that we too are invited into this heavenly worship of the God who sits on the throne.

The one who is a joy to serve and a joy to worship, not because he makes everything easy and straightforward, but because we know that he is in control of all things, whatever situation we may face.

And one we can know loves us and will work for our good in every situation and in every uncertainty that we move through.

The God who is seated on the heavenly throne, reigning over all things, invites us to come and enjoy a life of security, worshipping him above everything else.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together.