

Revelation 4-5
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THE LAMB IN THE CENTRE ... WHO OVERCOMES!
(Fifth in a series of sermons on "The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ")

What a text! More than any other section of the last book of the Bible, these two chapters put everything into perspective for me. Indeed, more than any other section of the whole Bible, these two chapters help me keep my balance in the midst of all that is going on in the world right now.

Apocalyptic literature does that. Apocalyptic literature puts everything into perspective, into cosmic perspective. As we have seen, apocalyptic literature has two practical purposes, two pastoral purposes. If we keep these purposes before us as we read The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, we will not go astray.

The first practical pastoral purpose is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. Jesus is coming, and He is bringing with Him a new heaven and a new earth! He is bringing with Him a new city; a city full of energy and creativity, a city full of beauty and glory, a city where we experience an intimacy with God that goes beyond everything we have ever known. We will focus on that future reality during Advent, as we make our way through Revelation 21 and 22, under the title "So, What are We Waiting For?"

But second – and primarily – apocalyptic literature sets the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present. More is going on around us than we can figure out on our own, no matter how intelligent we might be. More is going on around us than we can deduce with our brains, than we can intuit with our hearts, or than we can imagine with our imaginations, and it is the purpose of apocalyptic literature to open up that more.

What the apostle John discovers, and then what we discover... or as I should more accurately say, what is disclosed to the apostle John, and what is then disclosed to us is that worship of the Living God is taking place all around us all the time. He is the "centre of unbroken praise," as the great hymn "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" puts it. Worship of the Living God is taking place all around us all the time. This has very practical implications for us in this visible, tangible dimension of our existence. It means that worship does not happen only on the Lord's Day. And it means that worship does not begin or end with us. Whenever we stop and worship, we enter into a service already in progress. Always already in progress.

The apostle John is on the prison island of Patmos. Why? Because he refused to worship. He would not join in the worship of Caesar, the worship that held the Roman Empire together. Respect Caesar – yes. (Or at least – maybe.) Pay taxes to Caesar – OK. Pray for Caesar – certainly. But worship Caesar as "Lord and God" (*Domine et Deus*) – No. To worship Caesar would mean that John would be denying everything he knows about who God in Jesus Christ is, to join the worship of a mere mortal usurping the place of God, to join the worship of the nation-state. So he is sent to Patmos as a "political trouble maker," as "an atheist."

On a Lord's day, he is worshipping in the Spirit. He is worshipping the Triune God of grace in the power of the Holy Spirit. He is alone as he worships, by himself on the rock piles, choosing in his miserable circumstances to lift his soul in worship. And then he discovers that he is not alone at all! He discovers that somehow, on the prison island, he has entered into worship that has been going on a long time. Worship already in progress – always, already in progress. Through Revelation 4-5, we have an apocalypse of the present moment. Worship is taking place quite apart from us, thank you. The only question is, will we enter in?

Revelation 4-5 is the opening scene of the second act of the great drama that Jesus put on for John on Patmos. The first act is Revelation 1-3, where the glorified Jesus is standing in the middle of the seven churches of Asia Minor, speaking His authoritative message to each of the churches. That act closes, and the second act opens ... with the verb "open." After these things, I looked, and behold (look!) a door standing open in heaven" (Revelation 4:1).

A new act, with new scenery, new props, new actors, and new costumes; an act which continues all the way through Revelation 11:18. And then in 11:19, the third act begins, again with the verb "open" – "and the temple of God that is in heaven was opened." So too, the fourth and fifth acts open with the verb "open." And yes, all the acts of the drama go together in a grand chiasm! As I will, Lord willing, show us in the New Year.

In the opening scene of the second act, we meet the two dominant images of the last book of the Bible: a throne, and a Lamb. In the third act, we will meet the other major image, the dragon. For now, we see the two dominant images, the two that stand after the dragon is defeated – praise God! – a throne, and a Lamb.

Here is the plan for the remainder of our time together today. Let us simply walk through the text making observations on what is going on. And then let us draw out three major implications for our lives today.

"I looked," says John, "and behold..." It is a command – "look!" – the second most frequent command of the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. The first most frequent being "do not be afraid." We obey the first by obeying the second. "Look!" The implication is, "turn and look!" "Turn away from all that you are looking at ... and look!"

"A door." A door into heaven. Open! That is worth the price of admission to the drama. Open! The door into heaven is open, with the sense that it will remain open, never to be closed. Because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, the door into heaven is open. And, with John, we are invited to go through the door.

"In heaven." As I've said many times, in the Bible, heaven is not a far away place. Heaven is another dimension of reality very close at hand – very close. All around us – ordinarily not visible, not audible, not touchable, but very close at hand. And the door into that other dimension of reality is open!

John hears a voice cry "Come up here." It's the voice he had heard at the beginning of his experience that day in Patmos... the voice of Jesus. "Come up here." And because John has written what he experienced for us, we know that the voice is saying the same thing to each of us today: "Come up here. The door is open. ... Come farther up and further in."

And John says he was immediately “in the Spirit” as he had been as he began to worship that day. And another “behold,” another “look!” A throne. Along with the Lamb, it is the dominant image of the book of Revelation. Look! A throne!

This is not the first time in the drama we meet this throne. We met it at the end of the first act, at the end of the seventh message, the message to Laodicea. Jesus promises those who overcome – “I will grant you to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne” (Revelation 3:21). We will meet the throne many more times as the Drama unfolds, leading to the wonderful claim in 21:5 – “And He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, look, I am making all things new!’”

Now the fact is John was not the first person to be given an apocalypse of the throne. It happened hundreds of years before to the prophet Ezekiel and to the prophet Daniel. And John conveys what he saw through the words and images Ezekiel and Daniel used to convey what they saw. It also happened to the prophet Micaiah. In a confrontation with one of Israel’s kings, Micaiah says, “I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the hosts of heaven standing by Him...” (1 Kings 22:19). And it happened to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 6, a text many of you know well: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD sitting on a throne...” and the text goes on to speak of creatures attending the throne singing “Holy, Holy, Holy!”

But, as we shall see, John sees that things in heaven have changed from the time of Ezekiel and Daniel and Micaiah and Isaiah. Big time! Things in heaven have changed!

Look! A throne. With someone sitting on it, and we have every reason to believe that this One Who is sitting on the throne is not going to fall off it. He is not going to have a stroke or a heart attack. King Uzziah dies. Emperor Domitian struts across the stage of history in pompous arrogance ... and dies. But the great Emperor remains seated on the throne. Since the time when the prophets first had an apocalypse of the throne, the world has witnessed thousands of en-thronings and de-thronings. China has gone through ten major dynasty changes. Japan and India have gone through even more. Hundreds of powerful, aggressive, threatening, seemingly invincible empires have come and gone. Sumeria, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Ottoman Empire, the Inca and Aztec empires.

In the years that First Baptist Church has worshipped on this corner, history has witnessed the de-throning of the Spanish, Portuguese, Austro-Hungarian, and Dutch empires. Gone are the German Reichs of Kaiser Wilhelm and Adolf Hitler, the Italian reign of Benito Mussolini, the Japanese reign of Emperor Hirohito, the reign of Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. We have seen the rise and fall of Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, and Nikita Khrushchev, Mao Tse Tung, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, Ho Chi Min. We have witnessed the dismantling of the once mighty Soviet Union, and the collapse of the apartheid regime of South Africa. Hong Kong is now part of the People’s Republic of China, further diminishing the once mighty British Empire. Gone are Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. The United States of America teeters on the “fiscal cliff,” a symptom of even deeper instability.

Do not be afraid! Look! A throne! With someone sitting on it! Sitting. Unmovable. As the drama unfolds, we will hear how John uses the phrase again and again, “He Who sits on the throne.”

“And He Who was sitting,” says John, “was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance” (Revelation 4:3). Later, “from the throne proceed flashes of lightning ...” (Revelation 4:5). But of course! The Living God is pure light. When Ezekiel saw the throne, he said its brilliance was like glowing metal. When Daniel saw the throne, he said it was like flaming fire. Like. Like.

Suggesting there is simply no way to describe the quality or quantity of light shining from and surrounding the One Who sits on the throne.

Psalm 104 says “He covers Himself with light as a garment.” As the apostle Paul puts it in his first letter to Timothy: “He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; He alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light ...” (1 Timothy 6:15-16). Whenever and wherever the true God makes Himself known there is light.

“Long my imprisoned Spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray,
I woke, the dungeon filled with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.” (Charles Wesley, “And Can it Be”)

So John also sees “seven lamps of fire burning before the throne” which he learns are the seven Spirits of God (Revelation 4:5). Seven, the number of completeness. Seven Spirits of God is a way of saying the Holy Spirit in His completeness, the fire of God in His completeness, the purity of God in His completeness, the Creativity of God in His completeness. Very close at hand – spilling through the open door into this dimension of our existence, flowing upon and around and through and in the followers of Emperor Jesus.

And John sees a rainbow around the throne. Of course! The rainbow is the sign of God’s just mercy and merciful justice. It is a sign that the One Who sits on the throne deals with human sin as it deserves (the flood), and then deals with humanity as it does not deserve (mercy).

And John sees before the throne “a sea of glass like crystal” (Revelation 4:6). I take the sea to refer to the power of chaos, not to an actual body of water. The sea is the image for the power of chaos, always threatening to suck the cosmos into the void. Before the throne ... like crystal. Calm. Subdued. Shining with the beauty and orderliness of the Creator, which is why we have those moments, when we cry out to God in the chaos, and there comes over us an unexplainable calm. In the presence of Him Who sits on the throne, chaos is subdued.

And John sees twenty-four other thrones, with twenty-four elders sitting on them, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. They are assembled in a semi-circle as the elders were in the Jewish Sanhedrin. Does this mean there are thrones seeking to rival the great throne? No. It means the Living God has chosen to set up thrones around His, to invite others in on His governing of the world! 24. 12 + 12. Twelve representing the people of God before Jesus came; twelve representing the people of God after Jesus came. God brings His people around His throne to join Him in running His world!

And John sees four living creatures around and very close in on the throne. Weird looking creatures! I think they represent the whole of creation: like a lion, like a calf, like a man, like an eagle. Creation is gathered around the throne – all in ceaseless praise. This is a major theme of the whole Bible, creation knows there is a Creator, and creation knows this Creator is all together praise-worthy. Which is why Jesus said to those on Palm Sunday who wanted the children to stop singing, “if these become silent, the stones will cry out” (Luke 19:40). Creation has not succumbed to the illusion that casts its spell over our cultures. Creation knows the truth – creation worships! “Day and night,” says John, “they do not cease to say, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Revelation 4:8). Over and over and over again, never tiring of the repetitions. “Holy, Holy, Holy!”

And John sees that the twenty-four elders are inspired by creation worshipping. The redeemed people of God hear creation praising ... and join in! John says the elders cast their crowns before the throne, and sing: “Worthy are You, our Lord and God” – *Domine et Deus*, stealing the thunder from Caesar – “to receive glory and honour and power; for You created all things and because of Your will they exist and were created” (Revelation 4:11).

When the door into heaven is opened, we rediscover the truth. The universe is not an accident; we are not an accident. The universe, and we, were created. The universe has meaning; we have meaning. We are alive because the One Who sits on the throne wills us to be alive ! !

And now we come to the most dramatic moment of the drama. This is not just the most dramatic moment of act two, but of the whole drama of the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. There is no way to exaggerate the significance of this moment.

John sees a scroll in the right hand of Him Who sits on the throne. There is writing on the inside and on the outside, and it is sealed up with seven seals. It is the scroll of history; it contains the plan and course of history: it shows how God is going to establish His kingdom on earth.

John sees an angel asking with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” (Revelation 5:2). Who indeed? Who has the wisdom to understand the flow of history? Who has the power to guide history? Who can lead history to its inherent destiny? “No one,” John learns. “No one in heaven, or on the earth, or under the earth” (Revelation 5:3). No one was able to open the scroll. And John wept – “I began to weep greatly.”

Then comes the moment. John says that one of the twenty-four elders said to him, “Stop weeping; behold – look! (there’s that command again) – Look! The Lion, that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the scroll and its seven seals.” “The Lion of Judah” and “root of David” are messianic titles. “The Lion has come.” “The Lion has overcome.” “The Lion can open the scroll.” Yeah!

And then comes the moment. John says he saw... he saw a gigantic, mighty lion, right? Rippling with muscles, armed to the teeth, roaring with a roar that leveled everything in his way. Right? He saw a ferocious lion – “The Lion has overcome! And I saw a Lion.” No! That is not what happens.

“And I saw...” (Revelation 5:6). Ready? “And I saw between the throne ...” Between is not the right translation, it is “in the middle of,” “in the middle of the throne,” in the very centre. Ready? “And I saw in the middle of the throne,” which can only mean in the middle of the Almighty Who sits on the throne.

“And I saw in the middle of the throne ...” Ready? A lion. No. “A Lamb.” (!) “I saw a Lamb.” “As if slain.” “I saw a Lamb as if slain.” With seven horns. Horns – the symbol of strength. Seven horns, complete strength. In the weakness of being slain, immensely powerful. With seven eyes. Eyes – the symbol of insight, wisdom. Seven eyes – complete insight. In the weakness of being slain, immensely wise.

A Lamb. As I point out in my book on the text, in the Greek New Testament there are two words translated Lamb. One is *amnos*, which means adult sheep. This is the word John the Baptist uses when he sees Jesus of Nazareth coming down the road and says, “Look! The Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.” The other word is *arnion*, which means young sheep, little sheep, little Lamb. “Do not be afraid! Look! The Lion has overcome!” And I saw a little Lamb, Mary’s little Lamb, whose utter weakness – slain on the cross – turns out to be immense power and immense wisdom. The Lion does not overcome as a lion. No one overcomes as a lion. The Lion overcomes by becoming a Lamb, and giving Himself over for the life of the world.

And John then heard all of creation break out in joyous celebration. The twenty-four elders sing a new song. The four living creatures sing a new song. And everything “in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea” sings a new song. The elders fall down in adoration, just as the shepherds and magi did when Mary’s little Lamb was born into our world.

OK. Let us now draw out just three major implications from this heavenly, cosmic scene. First, it is safe to go through the door and approach the throne of the universe. In the middle, in the very centre of the One Who sits on the throne is the Lamb, the perfect, sufficient sacrifice for sin. It matters not how badly you have sinned. Well, it matters, because sin always ruins our lives, and we bear unbearable guilt and shame. But it matters not how badly you have sinned, it is safe to approach the throne of the universe. “As if slain” for the sin of the world! “As if slain ... a Lamb ... in the very centre,” in the very heart of the One to Whom we are all accountable is this slain lamb. So the writer of Hebrews joyfully declares, “Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace...” It is a throne of grace because the Lamb as if slain is right there in the middle of the throne. “Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

“Before the throne of God above...”
 Better yet, in the middle of the throne ...
 “Before the throne of God above,
 I have a strong and perfect plea;
 A great High Priest whose name is Love,
 who ever lives and pleads for me.
 My name is written on his hands;
 My name is written on his heart.
 I know that while in heaven he stands,
 No tongue can bid me to depart.”

“Behold him there the risen Lamb,
 My perfect, spotless, righteousness.
 The great unchangeable I AM,
 The King of glory and of grace.
 One with Him I cannot die
 My soul is purchased by His blood.”

“Worthy are you to open the scroll, and to break its seals because You were slain, and You purchased for God men and women from every tribe and tongue and nation.”

“My soul is purchased by His blood,
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ my Saviour and my God,
With Christ my Saviour and my God.”

Oh, sisters and brothers, it is safe to approach the throne of the universe just as you are!

A second major implication: we now know the secret ... the secret of history: sacrificial love. God wins through sacrificial love. Jesus wins through sacrificial love. “In the middle,” “in the very centre” is sacrificial love, self-giving love, self-emptying love. Lions do not win by being lions. In their arrogance and ferociousness and greed they dig themselves deeper into the grip of sin. It is as the Lamb that the Lion wins.

Seven horns – immensely strong. Seven eyes – immensely wise. And in His strength and wisdom giving Himself over to the power of sin and to death on the cross. “Weakness!” “Foolishness!” say those who do not yet get it. But through apparent weakness and foolishness, He wins. On the cross He wins.

Which is what the Gospel writer Matthew wants us to see. In the moment Jesus dies He wins. In the moment Jesus dies – slain – the curtain of the Temple is torn from top to bottom, rocks begin to split – creation crying out – and graves are opened! In the moment He dies, graves are opened? Yes, because in the moment He dies He defeats death, and death has to let its captives go free!

This is what C.S. Lewis tried to help us understand in his Chronicles of Narnia. Aslan the Lion does not win as the Lion. Aslan breaks the spell of the witch when he lays helpless on the stone table and lets evil do to Him what it has always wanted to do. And in the moment He dies, “the deeper magic,” as Aslan calls it, kicks in and death begins to “work backward.” Sacrificial love, as weak and foolish as it appears, overcomes. Nothing else does.

This is the heart of God’s way in the world: Self-giving, self-emptying love. The whole history of God with creation and humanity flows out of the heart of the Lamb in the centre of the One who sits on the throne. “Slain from the foundation of the world,” says a later text. The secret of history, from the very beginning ... and all the way to the end.

A third major implication: we are now reigning with the Lamb who overcomes. We. Now. Reigning. With the reigning Lamb. A new song: “And you [the Lamb] have made them [those the Lamb purchased with His blood] a kingdom of priests to our God.” What John told us in the Prologue to the Apocalypse – “And they will reign upon the earth.” Now. Not in some distant future. But now. The Lamb has overcome, and reigns even now. And so do we with Him!

It is why the twenty-four other thrones are there around the great throne. We have been brought in on the Lamb’s governing of the world. Talk about an apocalypse! Talk about setting the present in light of the unseen realities of the present. “And they will reign upon the earth.”

How? The secret of history. The same way He does – in sacrificial love. Sacrificial love moves history. The credit usually goes to those who wield great power, but they are not the real “movers and shakers.” Those who move history forward are those who, like the Lamb who alone can open the scroll, give themselves away in sacrificial service. Many of you who will never get credit for the way you serve your families and serve those with whom you work, this text is telling us, are the ones who make history move forward.

And who pray. John sees the elders fall down before the Lamb. And he sees that they each have gold bowls full of incense, which John discovers, “are the prayers of the saints” (Revelation 5:8). We reign with the reigning Lamb when we join Him in His praying, His intercession from the throne. The true “movers and shakers” of history are those who day in and day out, pray the way the Lamb taught us:

Father in heaven, on the throne,
Cause your name to be honored on earth as it is in heaven,
Cause your kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven,
Cause your good pleasure to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Thus all the hymns and songs and choruses being sung in the worship service already in progress:

“Worthy are you because You created all things.”
“Worthy are You because You were slain.”
“Worthy!”

When Isaiah was given an apocalypse of the throne hundreds of years before John, he cried out “Woe is me!” because he became overwhelmingly aware of his sin. John cries out “worthy are You.” No longer “woe is me” ... but “worthy are You!”

The hymns and songs and choruses are making a provocative political statement. I am amazed that John was able to smuggle the book out of prison without getting in worse trouble. “Worthy are You to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing” (Revelation 5:12). Those very words were said to the Emperor Caesar when he entered the Senate chambers: “Worthy are you to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.” Really? Caesar? John knows Who alone is that worthy. The Creator. And the Lamb Who is in the very centre of the Creator. “You are worthy” is the keynote of Christian worship. Not “woe is me”, but “worthy are you.”

Whenever we enter into a time of worship we are entering into a service already in progress, always already in progress. And the question to ask after worship is NOT “What did I get out of it?” I am not the issue. Asking “what did I get out of it?” is a sign of falling into the narcissism of our age. We are not the issue. The question to ask after worship is “did I enter in?” Did I join the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders and did I want to fall down before the Lamb in the middle?

Set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. And set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present. The Lamb – not the Lion – is on the throne. And all of creation is singing, “Worthy!”