

“The Heavenly Throne”

Revelation 4:1-11

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With chapter 4 the apocalypse, the revelation proper begins which John indicates by the device of referring back to the beginning of his vision as reported in chapter 1: “the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said...” Chapters 1-3 are, in a way, a cover letter accompanying and introducing the account of John’s visions. The letters, with their warnings of things to come, full of the evidence of God’s perfect knowledge of each church’s strengths and weaknesses, and with their promises to those who conquer in the faith of Jesus Christ, have prepared the churches for the ordeal to come. The visions will now disclose the nature of this conflict. [Caird, 60] There are many connections between chapters 2 and 3 and what follows; too many to mention. But the visions now to be given are directly related to the situation of the churches to which the letters were sent. The church must face an implacable enemy in a bitter struggle, an enemy that is able to make use both of human government and social forces in its war against the kingdom of God.

Text Comment

v.1 In a prophetic rapture or trance – either the continuation of the same one mentioned in 1:10 or a new one – John finds himself transported into heaven. This was the sort of thing that happened to the OT prophets. Remember, before the battle in which King Ahab was killed, in a similar rapture the Lord’s prophet Micaiah ben-Imlah had seen the Lord on his heavenly throne and had listened in on a conversation of the court concerning how God’s purpose was to be accomplished on earth. [1 Kgs. 22:19ff.] Jeremiah goes so far as to make it the qualification of a true prophet of God that he “has stood in the council of the Lord to see or hear his word.” [23:18]

Now, at this early point it is worth pointing out that the scenes of John’s vision will change without notice throughout the book. He is in heaven from 4:1 through the end of chapter 9. But in chapter 10 he is on earth again and in the middle of chapter 11 we find him back in heaven, and so on. In this rapture the prophet moves easily from heaven to earth and back again.

v.2 Caesar, of course, has a throne; and, we already read in 2:13 of Satan’s throne here on earth. But here is a throne in heaven, a greater throne, the symbol of an absolute sovereignty. *This throne is mentioned seventeen times in chapters 4 and 5.* The Christian churches of the time were small and threatened. The power of Rome seemed invincible. What they needed most to know was that there was a far greater throne than Rome’s and it was the throne of *their* King.

The description of the throne resembles that of Ezekiel 1:26-28 but is different in that, unlike Ezekiel, John makes little effort to describe the figure sitting on the throne.

- v.3 As often in apocalyptic literature it is impossible to visualize the description given. John is overwhelming the imagination. He wants us to think of the throne as an object of luminous splendor.
- v.4 There has been much debate as to the identity of the twenty-four elders. I won't take time to survey the various opinions. In my view by far the most convincing interpretation is that we are to see them as angels, perhaps archangels, who assist God in executing the divine rule on earth. In Psalm 89:7 we read: "In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared," the "holy ones" being the "heavenly beings" of the previous verse. Paul, remember, refers to the ranks of angels as "thrones, powers, and authorities." [Col. 1:16; Eph. 3:10]
- v.6 Lightning and thunder were often manifestations of God's presence, power, and majesty in the OT and we have already seen the seven spirits as a way of speaking of the fullness of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Though the sea of glass has been variously understood, it is probably an image like the one we read of in Exod. 24:10, where under the feet of God himself was "something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself" or what Ezekiel describes as "as an expanse, sparkling like ice" (1:22). The entire scene is one of insupportably matchless majesty and beauty.
- v.8 John's description of the four living creatures has distinct similarities to Isaiah's description of the seraphim before the throne of God (Isa. 6:1) and Ezekiel's description of the cherubim that he saw in his vision of the heavenly throne and its glory (1:4-21; 10:14). In other words, these four figures represent a still more exalted order of angels. All of the eyes suggest eternal vigilance. Think of the lion as the noblest of all creatures, the ox as the strongest, man as the wisest, and the flying eagle as the swiftest of all creatures. Here man is among the creatures before God the creator of all things. All the powers of nature are available for the use of God in ruling his world. These four creatures lead in the worship of God that is being offered in heaven, so all of nature is bowing before him as well.
- All of this – the twenty-four elders, the seven spirits, the sea of glass, the four living creatures – all of it is intended to do one thing: enhance the glory of the throne. Everything here concerns this throne and the one sitting on it!
- v.9 We noticed in chapter 1 verse 8 that the title "the Almighty" for God is used 7 times in Revelation. The phrase "him who sits on the throne" is likewise found 7 times in the book.
- v.11 In other words, everything in the world, absolutely everything, even evil spirits and evil men, are God's creatures and subject to his sovereign rule. The address to God in the first line of v. 11 – "our Lord and God" – is the same as what at that time was being used to address the emperor Domitian (*dominus et deus noster*; Suetonius, *Dom.* 13]. There are those who pretend to the title of Lord and God and then there is the living Lord and the Almighty God himself!

In September the Iranian parliament approved a draft bill that would codify the death penalty for any male Iranian who leaves his Islamic faith. Women would get life imprisonment. 196 votes were cast in favor, just seven against. There is, as you know, an ancient Christian minority in Iran as well as followers of other faiths, such as Baha'i, which originated in 19th century Persia, the modern Iran. Armenian and Assyrian Christians who have long lived there have usually been left alone. But there is a growing number of Protestant Christians – some estimates put the number as high as 100,000 – many of whom converted from Islam and these Christians live in greater danger. There have been murders and others have disappeared. The last man to be officially executed for apostasy from Islam was only thirteen when he converted in 1960 but was executed for his apostasy thirty years later, December 3, 1990. He was offered a choice by the authorities: he could denounce his Christian faith and the church of which he was now the pastor, or be executed.

“Of course my father refused to give up his faith,” his daughter, who now lives in England, recalls proudly. “He could not renounce his God. His belief in Christ was his life – it was his deepest conviction.” So two weeks later prison guards took Hossein Soodmand to the prison gallows where he was hung. [This from the *Daily Telegraph*, online, 10/31/08] Now Hossein’s son, Ramtin, a minister of the Evangelical Church in Iran, has been arrested and is being held without charge. The family fears that, though Ramtin is not a convert from Islam, having been raised in the Christian faith, he could become one of the first to be executed under the new law should it be enacted. The accusation so far made against him is one of anti-government activity, which apparently is to be understood as meaning any evangelical Christian ministry. (I got the details of this story from British newspapers and Amnesty International; you are less likely to have read it in the American media.) Compared to a situation like this, our economic problems in the Western world are small potatoes, aren’t they?

We American Christians have faced nothing like this for hundreds of years. There has never been a systematic persecution of Christians in the history of our country and what persecution there was of some particular sects in colonial days amounted to the imposition of inconvenience only, no danger to life or limb. [The execution of four Quakers on Boston Common in 1660 was the result of their defiance of their repeated banishment from the Massachusetts colony.] But from the days of the Apostle John onwards there have been many times when Christians faced immediate threats to life and limb, to having their spouses and their children taken from them, to demands of forced conversion, to the loss of property, and to imprisonment. When such Christians read Revelation it comes to them, as it was meant to come to them, as a drink of cold refreshing water, as armor for the battle, and as a weapon of cold, hardened steel.

What we are being told in chapter 4, in the dramatic imagery of apocalyptic literature, is that there is a reality that one does not see on earth and in the center of that reality is the divine throne, symbolizing the divine sovereignty, the divine rule, the divine judgment, and the divine will. This throne is fully acknowledged in heaven, but not yet on earth. Many human beings are, in fact, utterly unaware of its existence. But what you see in heaven is the true reality that must eventually be acknowledged on earth as well. Heaven is the sphere of ultimate reality no matter the pretensions of earthly powers. The divine purpose *will* prevail on earth. And what is happening on earth, especially that which seems to be happening to the detriment of Christians

and the kingdom of God, *that too* is the outworking of God's eternal and ultimate purpose for mankind, for the world, and for his church. [Cf. R. Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 31]

What John's vision in chapter 4 means is that when Christians find themselves in danger they can be confident that their plight is so far from being a defeat for the plan of God, it is itself the divine plan, the will of the throne of God and the considered decision of the heavenly council. However little we can understand the purposes of God, however impossible it is for us to see how our troubles contribute to the inexorable progress of the divine plan for the world and the kingdom of God, the majesty in heaven is in absolute control over all that happens in this world and with the assistance of his holy angels is working his purposes out.

In war movies and in documentaries devoted especially to the history of the Second World War we have often seen large rooms lined with maps in the middle of which is a great table which itself is a map. Surrounding that table are men and women in uniform moving little flags or miniature tanks or planes or ships or other symbols that represent various military formations. It is what is called a situation room and it is a particular battlefield that is represented on the great map in the middle of the room. The progress of the battle is charted by the movement of the various symbols on that map. When a symbol of some kind is moved from one place to another it means either that a change has occurred on the battlefield and the map is being adjusted to reflect the new reality, or that an order has been given to a particular unit or formation to move to the place indicated on the map. [Caird, 60-61]

Well it is something like that that John shows us here. As we will see still more clearly as the vision unfolds, what John was given to see was the control room, the situation room of Supreme Headquarters. From that room the entire war being waged on earth between the forces of light and those of darkness, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the Devil, is not only being charted, but being controlled, movement by movement.

What is decided in heaven will have an exact counterpart on earth and events will unfold in human history precisely as they have been ordered to unfold in heaven. The commanders of *human* armies often do not succeed in imposing their will on the enemy. The enemy forces prove stronger than theirs or they are surprised by some maneuver of the enemy they did not anticipate or their own soldiers fight ineffectively or turn and run. But the supreme command of the kingdom of God, represented by this glorious throne, and by the angelic powers ranged around it, never fails to accomplish its purpose. It wins every battle, even when on earth there seems to have been a defeat, even a crushing defeat. History marches on according to the divine will and even the suffering and death of a faithful believer, such as Antipas, of whom we read in 2:13, proves actually to be another blow dealt the enemy, another stroke that weakens him and hastens his eventual destruction. Revelation, you see, is not about the details of a believer's life, the ebb and flow of his spiritual experience, the burdens she bears, the gains and the losses. Revelation is a big-picture account of human history and sees all of the individual particulars of any Christian's life as taken up into the whole plan, the whole battle, and the ultimate victory.

When Tertullian said that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" he was giving timeless expression to this truth. What the world would regard as the most ignominious failure and cruel defeat of the kingdom of God proves eventually to have been the means of its triumph.

And the reason for this is that all is happening according to a plan, executed faithfully and omnipotently by the maker of that plan through his mighty angels.

But what of us who are not at this moment threatened by overt persecution. None of us has ever wakened of a morning and wondered what harm might come to us or to our family because of our faith in Jesus Christ. None of us has spent an anxious night in prison wondering what fate we might face on the morrow. None of us has had to conspire to get some word of our situation out of the prison to our families. None of us has had to fall to our knees beside a prison cot to plead with God for the strength to remain faithful if our lives should be demanded of us on account of Jesus Christ.

It matters not. In Revelation the martyr is undoubtedly the representative Christian because he or she pays the ultimate price for loyalty to Jesus. In the life of the martyr the nature of a Christian's life as belonging to the deadly warfare between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness is starkly displayed. But everyone, no matter his or her circumstances, is somewhere on the map of the battlefield. Your life and mine are represented in that heavenly situation room by some small flag or in the symbol for some particular formation of the hosts of God. The devil is not at war only with those whom he has plans to imprison and kill. The seven letters make that perfectly clear. Some of those churches were suffering overt hostility and their members were in peril of imprisonment or death, such as the church in Smyrna. One church, that in Pergamum, had already suffered the martyrdom of one of its members. But others among the churches of Asia Minor weren't being attacked in *that* way at all. The enemy was employing different weapons and the church was engaged in a different kind of battle in Laodicea and in Thyatira and in Sardis. There the kingdom was being attacked with the allurements of false teaching and worldly prosperity. The Devil can weaken and stifle the witness of the church, he can even eradicate that witness in some places as surely by compromising the Christians' testimony or by muddying the message as by putting believers in jail or putting them to death. Certainly the Devil knows that the blood of the martyrs has often been the seed of the church. He will use other means when they are more effective.

In fact, church history seems to suggest that the kingdom of darkness is far more likely to gain ground by undermining the church's witness and service by worldliness and false teaching than by the threat of death. The Devil is working all the time to destroy the kingdom of God but overt and deadly persecution is only from time to time his strategy.

So for the discerning Christian reader in a time and place of political and religious peace, the vision of this throne in heaven should be as breathtakingly encouraging, full of solace, and calculated to nerve and steel the heart and will as it must be for those believers who are facing the gallows or the block or the pyre, or the violence of the mob, or the individual enemy's knife or gun or club.

Your life and mine are represented somewhere on the battlefield on the great map in the heavenly war room and how we are serving the Lord, the faithfulness of our lives, the consistency and enthusiasm of our witness, *all of this is contributing to the fortunes of the kingdom of God or not as the case may be*. How you deal with your temptations, which in some large part the Bible says are the insidious attacks of the evil one; the eagerness with which you

offer your obedience to God; the alacrity with which you seek to serve the gospel of Christ in the hearts and lives of others; all of this is part of the ebb and flow of this great battle that has been waged these thousands of years and has still long years to be fought before the end is reached and the final victory is achieved.

And this is John's point. Every moment of that battle, every advance and every retreat, is taking place under the eye of the one who sits upon that majestic throne and those who stand around it ready to fly to earth to do the Master's will at a moment's notice. Your life is known in heaven. You are part of a great story that is being written there and will be told there for ages to come. Your life, your service, your spiritual warfare, however small the scale may seem to be, is being deployed by forces far, far greater than yourselves. Being a child of God and a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ you have behind you and below you and ahead of you, to protect you and to make good use of you a power, a majesty, a sovereignty so absolute that it cannot fail at any single moment to accomplish its will in the world.

John says only that he saw a throne and describes the glory of this throne. But what is a throne? It is a visible manifestation of rule, of government, of control. And this throne, in heaven as it is, glorious beyond description as it is, is a rule, a power, an authority, a sovereignty beyond that of any other; *far beyond that of any other*. It is, as we read at the end of the chapter, the rule of the one who made the heavens and the earth and every being and every thing that dwells in them. He is in absolute control of what he has made; nothing stands outside his rule. *That* is the meaning of the throne in heaven that John saw!

So put yourself in this picture. Find yourself, if you can, beneath some symbol on the great map of the battle now being waged in this world: the real battle, not the various battles people imagine that they are fighting. A battle whose end is a foregone conclusion because of the victory won by Jesus Christ, but whose completion has taken these thousands of years and all of this blood, sweat, and tears.

Many of you by now will have heard of the young Saudi woman, twenty-six year old Fatima Al Mutair. Fatima was the daughter of a Muslim cleric but she had become a Christian, apparently largely, if not exclusively, through Christian witness she encountered on the Internet. As sometimes happens in the kingdom of God, she grew in grace very rapidly in her short Christian life. She got to know other Christians and spoke to them of her faith in Christ and love for him via the internet and in a few cases by telephone. She wrote a poem in which she speaks to Muslims of the love of Christ and her hope for them. Translated from Arabic it reads in part:

May the Lord Jesus guide you, O Muslims,
And enlighten your hearts that you might love others.

What we profess are the words of the Master of the prophets.
We do not worship the cross, and we are not possessed.
We worship the Lord Jesus, the Light of the worlds.
We left Mohammed, and we do not follow in his path.
We follow Jesus Christ, the Clear Truth.

Truly we love our homeland, and we are not traitors.
 How could we betray our homeland, our dear people?
 The homeland of my grandfathers, their glories, and odes – for it I am writing.
 And we say, ‘We are proud, proud, proud to be Saudis.’

Be content to leave us to ourselves to be believers in Jesus.
 Let us live in grace before our time comes.
 There are tears on my cheek, and Oh! the heart is sad.
 To those who become Christians, how cruel you are!

And by God, I am unto death a Christian.
 Truly I cry for what passed by, of a sad life:
 I was far from the Lord Jesus for many years.
 We are Christians – in the path of Christ we tread.

You see, Jesus is my Lord, and He is the Best of protectors.

In August, just two months ago, she was brutally murdered by her brother after she had declared and explained her Christian faith to her family. Before he killed his sister, he had locked her in her room for four hours. During that time she sent out a final letter to friends on the internet, the concluding words of which were taken from Psalm 27: “He is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” It is reported in the Arab press that her tongue was cut out.

Her story is now being read throughout the Arab Muslim world on various Arabic internet sites and is the talk of many chat rooms. No one can understand the meaning of that beautiful young woman’s violent death, no one can understand its present importance or its ultimate significance who cannot see the throne in heaven encircled by the rainbow, and surrounded by the angelic hosts who are crying

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty!