

A Throne in Heaven

By Dr. William W. Goligher

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Tenth Presbyterian Church
1701 Delancey Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

Well, you shouldn't have too much trouble finding our reading this morning. It is in the book of Revelation chapter four. And let me just say how grateful I am to your minister for inviting me to come and preach this year and to share from the Word of God with you and we have been over for about two weeks in the States. We spent last week down at the ocean. It was like being at the ocean anywhere in the UK or Northern Ireland. You know, it was wet, miserable, but the people were very warm and friendly so that was good. That is always a plus side. Maybe that is not typical in England, I would say, but then a Scotsman would say that anyway.

So focus, Revelation chapter four we are reading this morning. And this is the first or the second vision that John receives and this is the introduction to that vision. Chapters four and five, really, are the introduction to that vision. And I am looking at those two chapters over these next two Sundays. So we begin in chapter 4:1.

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, 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.

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 twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. 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.”¹

It would have been easy to be cynical. Believers were a weak persecuted minority within a largely pagan society. Their congregations were doctrinally compromised and morally lax. They were individually more or less faithful to God. They were a mixed multitude subject to mixture and error. Many of them had degenerated to as almost be no churches at all but synagogues of Satan. The power of the state was directed against them. They found themselves marginalized, misunderstood, misrepresented. The pressure of culture was threatening to throttle what life there was and what difference their faith made.

What these people needed was to be reminded that there was some purpose, some meaning, some direction, some future for this small beleaguered community of God’s people.

I could be talking about churches today in certain parts of the world. I could be talking about churches in that section of the world where Islam is the dominant religion. I could be talking about churches parts of Europe and in my own homeland where it seems that everything is going against the Church and where daily it seems we are hearing reports of people within the Church living lives and believing things and saying things that are so contrary to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

While that was the Church in the first century and that is why they needed a Revelation from God of Jesus Christ through John for these churches. That is what the book of Revelation is about. And the big idea in the book of Revelation is this. How does Jesus shape history? How does he shape history? Has somehow or other history got out of control? Are events out of his control?

Well, the answer at the beginning of the book of Revelation is that he is the ruler of the kings of the earth and the answer at the end of the book is that he is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Then Jesus writes these letters that you see in chapters two and three and in those letters you find that his representatives on earth, the visible manifestation of the kingdom of God in the churches of God seem so distant from his purposes. Each of those letters, each of those letters reflects on the first vision, the vision of the Son of Man, the Lord

¹ Revelation 4:1-11.

Jesus clothed like a king and a high priest who speaks like a prophet to his churches echoing the language of Isaiah telling them to hear what the Spirit says to the churches; a prophet, a priest and a king, one who analyzes the life of his Church, one who promises to those who overcome that they will be part of a brighter future, a great future. In fact, many of the letters that you read in chapter three and two and three echo the language at the end of the book where there the Church, while the Church is united, the Church is home, the Church like a new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God, the Church is perfect, its people perfect, all sin is excluded. The nations of the earth bring their treasures to it. It is a grand vision.

Somewhere between Jesus risen and that grand vision being fulfilled there is the reality of these seven churches, seven the number of completeness, the seven churches, the Church throughout the ages, the Church today in the world, the Church in all its weakness and failure.

You take those seven churches and you see just how bad things are and how cynical you may become when you look at the Church as it is today.

Numbers one and seven, well, they have almost lost the plot all together. Jesus is sick of them. He wants to take away their lamp stand of witness. He wants to eliminate them all together as it were because of their disobedience.

Numbers two and six, well, they are doing better. And, by the way Philadelphia is in there. It gets good marks and the critique is good there that they are the only two churches that get any credit at all, only two of the seven are commended without critique by the risen Lord.

Numbers three, four, five, well, they are in a bad shape. There are, in one case, the majority of people in the church have abandoned the faith, really, and turned to false doctrine. In another church there is a faithful minority, but they are a minority within a... they are a majority, rather, but they are not an influential majority within the church. They are making no difference, really, to the way in which the church is going.

And the other church, well, it is just a mixture. One could go one way or the other.

Either way, whenever you look at those seven churches you find them oppressed by the state. You find them invaded and infiltrated by the world. You find them in doctrinal deviation and in moral error. The purest churches under heaven are subject to both mixture and error. That is the way it is in Revelation and that is the way it is today.

And the world they lived in was chaotic. People that were in those churches they were susceptible if there was a famine, well, they went hungry. If there was an earthquake, they were killed in their own homes. If there was an epidemic they caught whatever the epidemic was. Whenever there was a war they were caught up in the violence of that war. The things that happened in the world happened to them. So where were the benefits of belonging to King Jesus?

Well, those were some of the questions raised in the early part of the book. And that first vision cannot stand in greater contrast to this second vision where in this second vision we are taken away from the Church as it is and from circumstances as they are and John tells us that once again he looked, this is his second time of looking, to see another vision, a second vision. In other words, this is not a chronology of timing, but a chronology of vision in verse one.

“After this I looked, and behold,”² I saw something, a vision of God, “...a door standing open in heaven!”³

Well, that door opened in heaven leads him into perspective of what is going on in the world that you and I need to grasp.

The one who has opened the door, the one who invites John or summons John, in fact, to enter and to look into this heavenly perspective is none other than the Son of Man. The same voice that spoke to him in chapter one like a trumpet now speaks to him again. Then he had spoken on the Lord’s Day. Now he speaks again, but, once again, he is in the Spirit, a phrase often used of the prophet being given revelation from God. He is in the Spirit. And he is being shown what must take place after this.

The language echoes the language of Daniel. Daniel in chapter two verse 28 he has a vision from God and he talks about the God who reveals mysteries, the God who makes known to people what he is going to do in the latter days, who reveals mysteries to make known what is to be.

And now John says, “Daniel’s vision of the latter days, Daniel’s visions of what is to be, that is now coming to pass. These things are occurring now in the life of the Church in this day.”

John is invited to see things from Jesus’ perspective.

Well, what do we see when we look into the... through the open door into heaven? What do we see? Well, we see heaven’s throne. We see heaven’s throne and we hear heaven’s theme.

Follow with me as we walk through it together.

First of all we see heaven’s throne because it begins with this mention of throne in heaven.

This word “throne” is used 42 times or 51 times in the Bible. Forty-two times are in this book of Revelation. It is one of the big ideas, big themes of this book. And the idea of the throne is of the holy of holies in the temple. Remember in the holy of holies there

² Revelation 4:1.

³ Ibid.

were various aspects of furniture, but there was the ark of the covenant. And on top of the ark there were the two cherubim and the empty space between the lid of the ark was the mercy seat or sometimes called the throne of God.

God dwelt between the cherubim above the mercy seat in the holy of holies, the center of the temple.

Well, apparently the heavenly temple is the original of which the earthly tabernacle and temple were the pattern... were patterned after. They were echoes of it. And so in the heavenly temple, in the heavenly throne room there is God right on the throne, sitting between the cherubim as we will see.

And the one seated there, we are told in verse eight, is the Lord God almighty.

Well, John is very reticent when he describes the one sitting on the throne. You see how he uses what language is available to him. The language is the language of appearance and likeness. But it is echoing language from the Old Testament. And John's Revelation needs to be interpreted not with a newspaper in your hand, but with a Bible in your hand. You will need books like Ezekiel and Daniel to understand what is going on in the book of Revelation.

So, for example, Ezekiel says that he had a vision like this. He tells us he was among the exiles and the heavens were opened and he saw visions of God and there was the likeness of a throne, he says. And one seated on the throne who had the appearance of a human, a human appearance.

Daniel, he saw thrones. He said, "I looked and, behold, there were thrones placed and the Ancient of Days took his seat on his throne."

So this is an Old Testament idea echoed by John. He gets to see through the curtain. He gets to see through the door into heaven and he sees God on his throne. In other words, God reigns. That is the message. God is absolute in his leadership. He is at the very center of everything. He is the center of the glory of heaven.

Now this comes as a shock, I think, to people in our day that are into democratizing everything within the Church. There is no democracy in the universe. There may need to be democracy in human arrangements because we are all fallen people and we need checks and balances in the way in which we govern and rule. But there is no democracy at the center of the universe. There is only an absolute throne in the center of the universe.

I come from a country we have a monarch still. We may not have in the long term, but we have one at the moment and she is good for tourism and various other... but... bless her and that is not a reflection on her, but really that is why we have her. She has no power. Anything she says in public has to be passed by the political, her political masters. She has absolutely no power at all. She is a constitutional monarch.

But this monarch is no constitutional monarch. He is an absolute ruler. And the universe is his. We exist for his pleasure and for his glory.

Now I don't know what you do with this throne if your desire for God and your idea of God is someone who makes you feel better about yourself or a God who jumps to your tune or a God no bigger than your imagination or a God you can question or correct or blame. I know what you do with this throne, but I know that people in the world today who need to know about this throne, people whose family knows serious illness need to know that God reigns. People whose friends or spouses or pastors have let them down need to know that God reigns. People who are cynical about the Church need to know that God reigns.

You all are afraid that Europe is going to turn Muslim need to know that God reigns. So in line with the genre of this book then as John describes the one seated on the throne you notice that he uses symbols, right? At the very beginning of this book in chapter one verse one we are told that this revelation from God of Jesus Christ was given in symbols. That phrase "to show" means in signs and symbols. And so right through the book there are these symbols. And here there are symbols of God, symbols of the sovereignty of God.

Look at the position of this throne. Right at the very heart of the heavenly cosmology he sees the throne. He sees circled around the throne these other 24 thrones of the elders and then he sees outside of that circle he sees on the four points of the compass, he sees these beings, these creatures, these angelic creatures, perhaps who are there on the outside.

In other words, the heavenly cosmology is throne centered. It lies at the very heart of everything.

And he talks about the glory of God. He sees the glory of God. Do you notice the language that he uses, the one who sat on that throne had the appearance of... Well, had the appearance of what? Well, he uses these luminous colors to describe the person seated on that throne: jasper or carnelian, a rainbow, an emerald, all of those emphasizing the unapproachable brightness of his being as God radiates with light. He clothes himself with light as a garment. He dwells in unapproachable light. This God is luminous with his own glory. And he.... the first, the mercy of God. Do you see that in the rainbow? The rainbow that captures the mercy that was the appearance, a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald around the throne, that rainbow that is God's covenant sign not just to us believers, but to the world of God's faithfulness and his common grace in sending the sun to shine on the righteous and the unrighteous and the rain to fall on the godly and the ungodly. I discovered it is the godly as well as the ungodly this past week.

So he sees the mercy of God and his common grace to humanity. He sees the justice of God. There are sound effects to the side. Sound effects off and he hears the flashes of lightning, the rumblings, the peels of thunder. Those signs, those signs have been heard before in the Bible, back in Exodus. Say, they were there when the law was given. They

were there when God appeared on Sinai. They threatened judgment to the world. This emphasizes the justice of God. There is something of the holiness of God there, the seven spirits. This is full of symbolism, this book. When God is described he is described as this many splendid colored, one luminous being. When the Son of God is described he is described as the Son of Man, as a priest, a prophet and a king and a lamb and a lion and so on. When the Holy Spirit is described, he is often describe din this seven fold way, I think, echoing Isaiah, the seven fold spirit of God.

In chapter one the seven fold spirit is full of eyes. He knows everything. Here he is like burning torches. He is pure. He is burning in his purity, the Holy Spirit of God.

You see the transcendence of God. In front of him is a sea of glass like crystal. In prophetic visions in the Old Testament the sea of glass often appears in pictures of God's throne room. It is as if it is the floor of heaven and the ceiling of earth, this sea of glass. Underneath that sea of glass there is our experience where the wicked are like a troubled sea. The Bible says this chaotic scene is a picture of humanity at odds with itself, the world in all its chaos and rebellion. There in the presence of God it is all calm, all tranquility. God sits undisturbed by what is disturbing us here. God is undisturbed in his majesty by what disturbs men here. The wars here do not affect the position of God as king. The trials of the Church here never threaten the throne of God where he reigns. That is the point. Nothing rises above that sea of glass, as it were, to disturb or topple or destroy the reign of him who lives forever and forever, the king.

Now, you see, all of this is merely an analogy as it always is whenever the Bible is describing God. It never describes God as he is in himself. It describes him in a way that fires our imagination and if we use the tools the Bible gives us, the Bible itself gives us, we begin to see something of the majesty and the glory of God.

Ezekiel, had a similar vision. I have said and Ezekiel in chapter two says this.

“I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.”⁴

So there is the Lord, then there is the glory of the Lord. That is the outshining of his inner splendor, his inner character, this luminosity as it were of being. And then there is the likeness of the glory of God. And then there is the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God and what John shares with us, what Ezekiel shares with us is the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And we are left open mouthed in wonder at even seeing him from this remove, the splendor of the king.

And this is the kind of language the Bible gives us to describe the transcendence of God. So any literature, any literature, any popular literature, novels that portray God in such an immanent way that he is like a mother figure or a figure who is just one of us, beside us,

⁴ Ezekiel 1:27-28.

not knowing the future, not knowing the end from the beginning, rolling with the punches, not working to a script, all those visions of God, not the vision of the God that we find in the Bible, not the vision of this God who reigns over all.

He is the one who sits in heaven and laughs at the world with all its petty pretensions, all the efforts of the world could topple him from his throne and destroy his Church. He sits in heaven and laughs them to scorn.

That is heaven's throne and John is preoccupied with this, the throne. And you and I need to be as well. You and I need a perspective on the reign of God in the world.

We used to sing a song when I was growing up. So be it, Lord. Thy throne shall never like earth's proud empires pass away. Thy kingdom stands and rules forever till all thy creatures own thy sway.

But there is a throng in heaven, other forms of life around the throne. There are the elders here. These elders sing and chant. In verses nine and 10 they sing, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God."⁵

And some point out there they are speaking about others, not themselves. And so they may very well be that these elders are representative. They are a symbol. They are perhaps angelic beings. They are representatives in heaven of the Church. The elders, for example, are always the representatives of the people of God in a local church. And they are in heaven. We have representatives there.

Later on in this... this is, I think, the first time this number 24 is used in the Bible and later on in Revelation we read about the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the Lamb and they are the 12 gates and the 12 foundations of the new Jerusalem, the people of God, one universal people of God.

Now what is this saying to you? This is saying to you that whatever your present circumstances are, whatever you are going through, however mundane or difficult or trying that life you are living is, however constricting you may find that marriage, however burdensome you may find that disease, no matter how difficult you may find it to be unemployed, no matter how hard the struggle is at this point in your life or how happy and how jubilant you are in the way you are living your life, this is telling you where your identity really is. It is in the throne room of God. That is where the Church is. That is where you belong.

I mean the apostle Paul when he writes to the Ephesians you remember he tells us that God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places and then he goes on to say about you, that he raises us up with Christ and seats us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. That is where our identity is as the people of God.

⁵ Revelation 5:9.

Do you notice where we are? The representatives of the Church are right around the throne. There is no one in between. Right access, access to the Father. We come boldly to the throne of grace because we are in the throne room by grace.

While outside of that circle there are the creatures. Around the throne on each side of the throne are these four living creatures. And they certainly seem to represent two orders of being that we find mentioned in the Bible, the cherubim and the seraphim, the cherubim full of eyes and ox, a lion, looking like a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle. The seraphim with their six wings singing, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.”

Now I want you to notice again. He doesn’t say they are lions or they are human, just that they look like, they represent all of animate creation. They are living creatures.

And these creatures represent all animate life. You notice that if the elders represent the Church, then these creatures who represent humanity, one of them does, at least, represents humanity, this must be humanity in general. This must be humanity both fallen and unfallen. This must mean humanity both regenerate, born again and unregenerate, not born again. See, unregenerate people are represented before God in this sense, not in the saving sense, but in the sense that he has made them in his image.

And unregenerate people can show great people can show great courage, great compassion, great wisdom sometimes Jesus said. Children of this age are wiser in their generation than the children of light are. They can be. But even they are represented here because all things, all the things that God has made are represented by these creatures and they serve the Creator and they give glory and praise to him.

Well, that leads us on to the third thing, heaven’s theme. Do you see what occupies these people? They are occupied with these creatures? They are occupied with the worship of God.

The chief end of man, the chief end of the universe is to glorify God. All things created for his praise and pleasure.

Do you see how they worship God for his intrinsic attributes, his infinite holiness and power and eternal life? They say this continually, day and night, they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty who was and is and is to come.”⁶

In Isaiah’s vision he, too, heard heaven’s inhabitants sing praises to God focusing on this holiness. Here in this song it reflects the first song of God’s newly redeemed people in Exodus 15.

“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”⁷

⁶ Revelation 4:8.

⁷ Exodus 15:11.

And, you see, the worship of heaven is God saturated worship. It is occupied with God. It is focused on who he is. It is focused on his attributes, his characteristics. Everything else, as it were, is put to one side. Every other preoccupation, every other ambition, everything is put to one side. God takes central stage and everyone and everything is occupied with the glory and praise of almighty God.

Do you know how hard a thing that is for us on this side of glory to do? We have young men in our church. Some of them will watch this webcast. So they can switch off right now because I am going to talk about them. But they assist in the worship. They lead the worship. And we have in our order of worship, we have an opening prayer which is a prayer of adoration and then we all together will say a confession of sin. So that is kind of the initial part of our worship service.

Now that prayer of adoration, you have no idea how hard they get, the time they have trying to get their heads around what that is meant to be. So they will start and they will inevitably move into confessing their sin even though they worry about they do that together or they will praise God for the things that he has done for us or given to us and so on. And I am a bit of a hard task master. So I take them out and I slap them out, throw them outside in the rain, tell them, "Learn what to do, then you can do it again," That kind of, you know... I am really nice underneath it all. I just haven't shown them that side yet.

But it is really, really hard for them just to praise God for who he is in himself, period. Not to lapse into confessing sin, not to move out into praising him for things and thanking him for things. We do that later in the service, but just to be occupied with God.

I find it hard in our own personal lives. We slip immediately into our asking and that robs our prayer life, really of the dynamic that comes when I am occupied with God because when I am occupied with God it puts everything else in my life, all the things I want and need into their perspective.

The worship of heaven is God saturated, focused on the holiness of God. Do you see that?

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"⁸

When I talk about the holiness of God I mean everything that makes him above us, a transcendent holiness. He is simply above everything that we can imagine. He is apart from us. There is an inherent holiness.

Yes, there are things about him that we share. We love. Others we try to pursue justice, but his love, his justice are holy love and holy justice. They are at an infinite removed from where we are with ours. And because of that he is against us. We are rebels in this world. We worship and serve the creature rather than Creator who is forever blessed.

⁸ Revelation 4:8.

While the praise of heaven focuses on the holiness of God, it reminds me that he is against me and that I need his mercy in Christ. The praise of heaven focuses on his worthiness, his worthiness. They give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne who lives forever and ever.

You see, the one sitting on the throne occupies the thoughts and praises and thanks of God's creatures and God's people. They worship his majesty, his eternity and as the creatures are worshipping, the 24 elders they can't contain themselves. They fall down before him and they cast their crowns before him, crowns are their rewards, crown of righteousness, crown of rejoicing. What are these crowns? Whatever they represent they cast any, any symbol, signal, sign, anything that says importance or authority or reward or position or privilege or achievement or merit, they throw it all aside because standing in the naked, naked in the presence of God there is nothing, nothing we have to plead our cause before him. We are all, all debtors to his mercy.

They pour themselves out as creatures before their Creator.

Now, beloved, this is where our worship starts. It starts with the worship of God as our Creator and then in chapter five as our Redeemer in Christ. It starts with our worship of God as Creator. That is where we start worshiping idols and worship him, the one true God. And it is the worship of God as Creator, you see, that frees me, liberates me from all the other claimants on my time, attention and energy, all the things that demand my affection apart from him, my addiction to other people's opinion about me, my addiction to wanting more and more things, my addiction even to wanting spiritual blessings. Outside of him all of these things, it releases me from that idolatry.

And it draws me out towards him, my Creator who is also my Redeemer in Christ.

Well, I think the upshot of this this morning is that God wants us to be people who are occupied with him. He wants our praise to be real praise and he wants the whole of our lives, however beleaguered we may be, however rejoicing we may be, to be preoccupied with him.

Well, it was 36 years ago this month I was installed into my first pastorate. I was obviously about two at the time. [?] obviously. I always thought the word "installed" was something you did with a washing machine, but there you go. But I remember what we sang then. We sang it at my ordination which was in the May and in the June I was installed in my first church in Belfast in Northern Ireland. And I remember the words we sang and I remember getting up very early in the morning on the day of my installation to go down to the beach in Bangor in Northern Ireland and thinking about these words very deeply, thinking these words are going to form the rest of my adult life, God willing.

Do you know them? One verse in the hymn says this.

I will praise my maker,

While I have breath,
And when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler parts,
My days of praise shall ne'er be passed,
While life or thought or being massed,
Or immortality endures.

Let's pray.

Father, you have called us to be to the praise of your glory and loose our lips and our lives that by what we say and what we are we would bring praise and glory to you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.