

***All Things New: The Throne Room***  
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***November 24, 2019***  
***Psalm 47; Matthew 19:27-30; Revelation 4***

Our final Scripture reading today is from Revelation 4. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, infallible, and inerrant Word. "After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first 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 there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.""

In filmmaking, one of the most important shots you learn is called an establishing shot. That short bit, usually 10-15 seconds, tells us where we are and what we can expect from that place. We've all seen establishing shots and never given them one thought, but they're necessary for good storytelling. For example, how many romantic comedies have you seen that start with a birds-eye view of New York City?

In action movies like the James Bond films and the *Mission Impossible* series, we often get an incredible view of a faraway land and a little title that tells us we're in Morocco or Prague or Venice. Scary movies often give us a foreboding establishing shot of a haunted house or a graveyard. We need to know where we are so we can expect what comes next. A badly-made film doesn't do these well – when they don't, you're constantly trying to figure out where you are. A well-made movie establishes the time, place, the era, in such a way that we know what to expect next.

Today's passage is the establishing shot for the rest of the book of Revelation. Not everything is going to happen here, but it gives us the perspective of the rest of the book. Every part of the vision is seen from the viewpoint of the throne of God. When things get even stranger and weirder and scarier, we remember that this is the wide angle view. The truths in this passage guide everything else we'll witness through John's eyes.

I want us to spend a moment on John's first statement in chapter 4. "After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven." We want to hop forward to this heavenly door, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. "After this" – after Jesus dictated to John the letters meant for the churches we've studied together – John says, "I looked." Simple, right?

Not so much. Jesus gives John this revelation; we don't expect to receive our own revelation. But John looked. John waited for more. He actively participates and expects God to show him what He has for him. He's looking. So often, in my own life and I'm guessing in yours too, I think, "I love God, but I don't hear much from Him." But are we waiting on Him? Are we listening for His voice? Are we waiting for Him to show us His will?

I don't have the impression that God was silent for 50 years in John's life and then, suddenly, suddenly John has 20-some-odd chapters of Revelation. John was attentive to the Spirit, he was waiting for the Spirit to move, and when the Spirit did move, John was ready for it. If we want to be in the center of God's will for our lives, if we want Him to really be alive to us, if we desire the kind of life Jesus promises, we need to be looking. We need to be attentive.

Have you ever been on cruise control on a trip, just heading down the road on a journey, and you realize, hey, that was my exit two stops back? You have to backtrack, turn around at another exit, then go around to get where you were going. Or maybe you were reading a book and you think, "Wait, I've lost the plot." And you go back and you realize that you fell asleep a few pages back and missed an important detail. Our lives with God are like that, too. God has so much for us – so much love to show us, so many ways we can join Him in what He's doing to bring His Kingdom among us – but we've got to be looking for it.

Moving on... "the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." John is invited to adventure further in, to see what God is doing, to go through the door that God has opened in heaven so that he can see and experience and witness what is happening. John is clear that this is not his story about God's final victory but God's own revelation of what is to come. John rarely interprets what he sees for us because it's not his story to tell. He's passing along what God sets before him.

"At once I was in the Spirit." What does it mean to be "in the Spirit"? John has no means to get to heaven by himself, obviously. The Spirit steps into the picture and brings everything into view. To be in the Spirit simply means to be in a special moment with the Holy Spirit where we are attentive to what He wants and He is clearly and actively leading us, whether that's in prayer or in prophecy or in a vision like this. Once again, John is removing any idea that he has control over the vision or that he has any say-so in what he sees.

John goes on – "There before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne." John does not immediately tell us who is on the throne. He leaves it to the elders to tell us that, in part because he is so enamored of the sight itself.

Sheer brilliance emanates from God. He describes the one seated on the throne as having the appearance of jasper and carnelian. In our modern terms, what he's describing is the purest cut diamond and the purest cut ruby. It's not about the colors, because the stones John describes had many colors. What matters is that they were clear, radiant, dazzling in the way they handled and magnified and amplified the light. It is as if the one on the throne is reflecting light through the finest gemstones. Light and clarity are both symbols of God's utter purity and holiness.

Meanwhile, the throne is encircled with a rainbow. The rainbow is the most visual representation we have of God's covenant of grace with us; that when we were still steeped in our sin, God did not utterly destroy us but provided a means for creation to continue. We think of rainbows as half-circles, but this is a complete circle – the whole throne is encompassed by this reminder that God keeps His promises to His people; He brings wholeness to His people. The rainbow was seen by another prophet, Ezekiel, who also had a vision of the throne room.

The emerald of the rainbow corresponds to the gem stone in the breastplate of the high priest who served at the temple during the Old Testament period. The emerald was the stone that stood for the tribe of Judah...and it's through the line of Judah that we have King David, the ancestor of Jesus. So not only does the rainbow reminds us of God's covenants of grace through the centuries, it reminds us that God kept His ultimate covenant with us by providing a Savior through the line of Judah.

Let's keep moving through the vision. "Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads." If John knew who the elders were, he isn't telling. I think they represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles – God's leadership through both eras of His people. Their robes of white and crowns show how they have been purified and brought into God's presence, and how they have been rewarded for their service to their King.

Now comes the might of God. "From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder." Way back in Exodus, when the Israelites had been freed from captivity in Egypt, God met with them and Moses at Mount Sinai. The Israelites were terrified because the activity at the mountaintop was something like a class 5 tornado. When we think of God, sometimes we think of Him using His power. But the reality is, power and might are interlinked with Him. His very presence comes with signs of might and power. Even now, the power of a hurricane or a twister can terrify us because we don't understand them, and they can be devastating. These signs of the storm surrounding God remind us that we do not truly understand or fully comprehend who we are dealing with when we come into God's presence.

"Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God." Just a quick note on this. The Spirit of God is said to be seven-fold, or seven spirits, because seven is a number of perfection in biblical thought. This isn't a contradiction of the Trinity, but a unique understanding of the perfect work the Spirit does. Also, the lamps are blazing. These are not the lampstands of the church, weak and about to go out because of their sins. The Spirit burns with zeal and passion, accomplishing the work of the Father and the Son, and setting our hearts ablaze with the love of God.

“Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.” The crystal sea of glass is an important metaphor. In Jewish thought, darkness, destruction, and evil come from the sea. The Israelites were reluctant fishermen, but they never had a navy. They well knew the violent storms on the Sea of Galilee that struck without warning and sank many a fishing boat. But in God’s Kingdom, in God’s hands, the sea is pristine, beautiful, tranquil, calm. Even the greatest fear of God’s people is stilled and renewed and remade in God’s hand.

Now the living creatures. Each one is “like” something else – a lion, an ox, a man, an eagle. They represent the whole of the created order. They’re covered with eyes, which means that they see everything. Nothing gets past them. They are witnesses to the majesty and glory and holiness of God. Their perfect vision testifies to the awesomeness of God. I’ve got glasses, and my peripheral vision is lousy. But these creatures see everything, and so their testimony is true – they have a front row seat before all that God does.

And their testimony is that God is holy, holy, holy, the One who had no beginning and no ending. Above all, beyond His mercy, His grace, His wrath, His love, God is holy. He is unique and set apart, perfect in every way. He is beyond us in every conceivable way, and yet He condescends not only to make Himself known to us, but to love us and befriend us. Note too that God is described as worthy of thanksgiving. God has glory and honor in His very being, but He is worthy of thanks because He made us.

The elders glorify God constantly, putting their crowns aside, worshipping Him, saying, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." These people, the most highly exalted amongst all of God’s people, they consider their rewards nothing, their own power given to them by the Almighty as nothing, when they are before Him.

The Creator is worthy of all our honor and praise. Note we haven’t even gotten to salvation yet. Simply as the One who made us, He deserves all our praise. Even if salvation wasn’t in the cards, God would warrant all our worship because He made us. The Greek implies that our every moment even now is due to God’s continued involvement with us and our world.

What is this saying to us today? Beyond everything else, what we have to hear from this passage today, what we have lost in our modern American society, is the overwhelming awesomeness and holiness of God...His sheer authority and power and might and strength and glory and honor. In Jesus, God has become approachable. Yet in and of Himself, God is so beautifully and amazingly formidable that if we have any sense of who He is, the thought of His glorious presence should make us tremble in awe and wonder and holy fear.

I don’t love the end of Daylight Savings Time, but I have really enjoyed the sunrises and sunsets as of late. They are just gorgeous. They kind of leave me in awe. And recently, we went to the Creation Museum and I saw their planetarium show, one of the very best I’ve ever seen, that takes you out to the very farthest reaches of the universe we can see. It gives you just a glimpse of the sheer power of God to create such a vast, impressive expanse in the heavens. Yet all those things are still the creation. How much more amazing and awe-inspiring is the Creator who thought of them, who merely spoke and brought them all into existence!

We get a glimpse of the throne room to establish the nature of God's glory and holiness and power. That establishing shot tells us that if we have a proper perspective, living in wonder of God and worshipping Him and talking about Him will be second nature. Sometimes people have asked me if all we're going to do in eternity is worship God. And while I think we will have wonderful and pleasing work to do, while I think eternity will be far more awesome than we have any right to expect, yes, we will worship God a great deal. Yet that worship will be far better than the worship on earth, and we will worship through our work, through the things we do, in ways we don't expect now.

And once we have gotten a taste of the magnificence of God, the issue of desiring to worship won't be in question. Think about it this way: our modern mythologies of Star Wars and Marvel and DC superheroes and Lord of the Rings inspire people around the globe to discuss and debate. You can find videos nitpicking the finest nuances of every moment of every film. People spend all their waking hours watching and reading and writing and discussing them.

Those might not be your thing. Maybe you can spend hours debating the merits of the latest novel, the latest professional camera, the World Series or the Stanley Cup, or even the 25 Days of Christmas movies coming up on Hallmark. That's because something in us loves something about the thrill of sports or the thrill of a good mystery novel or the warmth of a sweet romantic story, and we could talk about it all day long.

If we fully comprehended God as our King, as the one who made the eternal covenant of salvation with us, who the living creatures call "holy, holy, holy," who is more radiant than the finest diamond, we would turn off the TV and put down the books and give up our concert tickets and sports memorabilia and bow at His feet because He is so awe-inspiring. We would talk about Him all day long because He has been so good to us.

And the reason we have this revelation now, rather than experiencing it in the future when we arrive in the Kingdom, is that we can live in that sense of awe and wonder now. We can long for those robes of purity and those crowns of good deeds done to honor our God. We can worship at the feet of the One who showed us grace while we were still in utter rebellion against Him. And if we have the proper establishing shot, if we have the proper perspective, doing the difficult things to follow God in this life is not so hard because we know the One who we serve by doing them. Getting through the hard things is never easy, but it's bearable because we know we are bringing glory to our Father.

So today, I invite you to bask in the glory of the throne room. I encourage you to take it in, not to understand it all – because in some places, I've only given you our best educated guesses – but to grasp the immensity of the place where God resides. And I welcome us all to worship our God – not just Sunday mornings, but throughout our weeks in our work, in our home lives, amongst our friends – and to enjoy His presence with us, because the King who reigns on the throne is the same King who lives in us through the Holy Spirit even now.