

Revelation 4
The Majesty of God
11/23/97
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Outline of Revelation:

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Gerald Sittser in his book entitled A Grace Disguised, tells of a fateful night in the fall of 1991.

Jerry, his wife Lynda, their four children and Jerry's mother piled into the Sittser's mini-van and left Spokane, Washington to visit a Native American reservation just across the state line in Idaho.

They had a great evening participating in an authentic pow-wow.

About 8:15 that night, when the children were making it plain they were done - The Sittsers climbed back into the van to make their way home.

Ten minutes into the trip home Jerry noticed a car approaching them.

It was coming very fast and on a curve in the road as they met, that other car driven by a drunk driver, swerved into their lane and hit them head on.

Jerry writes that in the first moments after the accident it was as if everything was in slow motion.

With three of his four children, some of them seriously injured, Jerry looked at the carnage before them - the unconscious and broken bodies of the fourth child (four year old Diana Jane), his wife Lynda, and his mother Grace.

In spite of every effort, he watched those three members of his family die.

He writes, "I (later) felt wild with fear and agitation...I could not stop crying. I could not silence the deafening noise of crunching metal, screaming sirens and wailing children. I could not rid my eyes of the vision of violence, of shattering glass and shattered bodies. All I wanted was to be dead.

“Over the next months I thought I was going to lose my mind...the foundation of my life was close to caving in.

“I wondered whether I could survive another day, whether I wanted to survive another day.” (Sittser 16-19)

Have you been there?

Have you ever had the bottom drop out of life?

Maybe for you it wasn't sudden, but it was the steady deterioration of your resources until you didn't know if you could go on.

In all of that, quickly as in Sittser's case or slowly, have you ever doubted God?

How can you read of an African who escaped his country to avoid ethnic hostility and is gunned down on a Denver street simply because he is black and not wonder where is justice - where is God?

How can you watch the pain on a young wife's face as she bravely sits through the funeral of her policeman husband and not ask - Why God?

Gerald Sittser said he had always believed in the sovereignty of God - that God is in absolute control of everything that happens.

God's sovereignty follows logically from who he is - he is God.

But Sittser writes, “This positive inclination toward God's sovereignty may come to a sudden stop in the face of severe loss.”

He was now faced with actually attempting to reconcile his belief in a sovereign God with the injustice and suffering he was experiencing.

He said that he avoided even thinking about God's sovereignty after the accident.

Do you believe in the sovereignty of God?

Do you believe that he is truly in control of all history, including yours?

The Apostle John in the book of Revelation, which we have been and will be studying for a few weeks, was, writing to Christians who lived in Asia Minor - modern day Turkey.

As we have already seen, these churches were experiencing a great deal of persecution.

Of the church in Ephesus (2:3) Jesus said "you have endured hardships for my name."

To the church in Smyrna he says, (2:9-10) "I know your afflictions...Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer."

To the church in Pergamum he writes, (2:13) "You did not renounce your faith in me even" when some were put to death for their beliefs.

These people were facing the loss of their homes, their jobs. They were faced with imprisonment and sometimes even death.

Can you imagine bearing up under that kind of pressure? How could those Christians in Ephesus and Sardis and the others make it?

The Lord Jesus, through John, is writing to encourage them - to give them information that will sharpen their perspective and enable them to persevere.

In chapter 1, both verses 1 and 19, Jesus said he was giving these words to John to write so that they would know what was ahead.

1:1 "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place."

1:19 "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later."

But before doing that Jesus addresses each of the seven churches individually in letters.

And so in chapters 2 and 3, which we have looked at over the past few weeks, we find seven short letters addressed to the specific situations of these churches with application to us today.

Now in chapter 4 we come back to the stated purpose of the book:
4:1 "Come up here and I will show you what must take place after this."

And beginning with chapter 6 we see a description of some of the things that will take place just before and during the time when Jesus comes again to earth.

Chapters 6-18 describe the events that will occur just before Jesus comes again.
And then chapters 19-22 speak of the coming of Jesus and the new heavens and new earth that will be ushered in for eternity.

But before Jesus tells John all that, He lets him see into heaven.

Chapters 4&5 are a picture of heaven.

Why? Why, again, interrupt the description of what will happen?

Because, this scene in heaven will prepare them for what they will see next in Chapters 6-18 and it will prepare them for what they would experience in life even before that time.

There's no way God's people could make it through life or the end of the age if they don't have one truth firmly fixed in their minds and hearts.

That truth is "Jesus wins!"

That's what this whole book is about, in two words - Jesus wins.

In light of what those first century Christians were experiencing in Ephesus and Sardis and Smyrna and what God's people would experience in the future - they desperately needed to be certain of what chapters 4 and 5 declare.

Another way of saying "Jesus wins" is to speak of the "sovereignty of God".

This chapter is setting forth one idea:

The whole world will literally blow up one day.

And your world may blow up even before then.

But know this: Under it all, is a sovereign God - things are not out of control.

Everything about this chapter is designed to reinforce this truth - Our God reigns supreme.

Now remember the relevance:

When life as we desire it to be falls apart and when the end of the age as God describes it comes to pass - we will want to know the answer to the question: "Is God truly in control?"

Or as Gerald Sittser put it:

"...over time I realized that the trajectory of my grief had set me on a collision course with God and that eventually I would have to wrestle with this most complex of issues. I knew I had to make peace with God's sovereignty OR I had to reject God altogether, OR I had to settle for a lesser God who lacked the power or the desire to prevent the accident." (Sittser 135)

Sittser knew he needed to come to grips with his stated belief in the sovereignty of God.

So what does the Apostle John see here in Revelation 4 and what does he tell those Christians in Turkey, that he expects will give them peace in the midst of their chaos?

What captures his mind and heart so that confidence, not doubt, can dominate?

John will now describe the indescribable!

I want you to engage your imagination.

John will paint a word picture that creates images in our minds.

This picture is more like impressionistic art - not every detail is clear but the focal point of the picture can't be missed.

John writes (4:2) "At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it."

As he enters this space called heaven his attention is immediately captured by one thing - the throne.

I've had occasion to be in court (not often for crimes that I had committed). But when it was for something I had done, I was most impressed with one piece of furniture in the room - the judges desk.

It rather dominates the room.

And when justice is in the balance - that desk looms even larger.

So it was with John - the throne grabbed his attention.

There is no doubt the throne spoke of one thing, authority.

It loomed large in the eyes of John.

And (4:3) "And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne."

Eugene Peterson reminds us that light is full of color.

We don't naturally see but a fraction of that color.

Precious stones are precious because they collect and intensify light.

"A stone, selecting certain colors out of the air and intensifying them, shows us the deep glory of the color that was in the light all the time. The ancient world valued stones not for decoration but for their capacity to reveal and deepen the colors of light." (Peterson 63)

What John apparently saw was the most awesome light show imaginable.

The colors were brighter and more varied than anything he had ever seen before.

Not only that but according to verse 5 (4:5) "From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder."

Have you ever been camping in a tent in the mountains when one of those summer thunder storms rolled through?

Seldom do I feel as little and vulnerable as at those times.

It is frightening and exhilarating at the same time.

What must John have felt? - the most incredible colors emanating from the throne and then also lightning the likes of which he had never seen before along with a thunder that rattled everything.

And at the same time John also saw seven lamps that were blazing and also a sea of glass, clear as crystal, stretching out before the throne.

Now certainly these descriptions remind those who read the Old Testament of the holy place in the Temple.

But without going into detail on them - what's the impression being made?

There's light everywhere. It's brilliant in its color, it's flashing like lightning, and it's reflecting off everything.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy that God dwells in unapproachable light (I Tim 6:16).

But the scene in heaven is not only of a throne and light everywhere.

John also sees 24 other thrones around the main one.

And on those thrones are seated 24 "elders" dressed in white and wearing crowns of gold.

Now we can't be certain if these are angels or human beings.

And while it is not crucial to the point of the passage - it seems to match other Scripture best to see the "elders" as representing all those who through the ages, trusted God.

It is probably significant that there were 24 priests who represented the people of God in the temple.

So the people of God are present in this throne room in heaven.

But there was more:

4:6b-8 "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."

This is strange to us but when we compare this with a similar vision that Ezekial had (recorded in Ezekial 1) we realize that these creatures were representative of all creation.

- The lion representing the wild kingdom.
- The ox representing the domesticated animals
- The face of a man representing humans
- and the eagle representing the birds of the air.

The idea of "Four" (as in four creatures) is used many times in the Bible to mean from one end of the earth to the other - the whole earth - the four winds, the four corners of the earth.

So we have all God's people present, we have all creation present and when we get to chapter 5 we see millions and millions of angels are present as well.

Can you imagine the scene?

- We saw pictures of the Washington Mall when Promise Keeper's men were rallying there.

- It looked like every street, every sidewalk, every square foot of grass had a person on it - a sea of people.

- That was only a little over a million - imagine 100s of millions.

And what are they doing? Bowing.
Bowing to whom? To the One on the throne.

What then becomes your impression of the one on the throne?

If the light and sound didn't overpower you, certainly the scene of millions upon millions on their faces, captured your attention - Whoever is on that throne is awesome indeed!

But it is not only what he sees that lends to that understanding but what he hears:
 4:8b "Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was and is, and is to come.'"

Just by experiencing what he had already experienced John would know this, but now it is explicitly stated.

In heaven all the inhabitants are saying what every one of needs to know and believe.

Three things about God:
 He is holy, He is all powerful and He is eternal.

R. C. Sproul in his book, The Holiness of God tells of Rudolf Otto, a German scholar who early in this century tried to study what the holy is.

He discovered that people in all cultures believe in the holy.

But they also have difficulty describing it.

It is something beyond description because it is in part beyond our experience.

We know it when we are in the presence of it but we can't define it.

Otto called it the *mysterium tremendum* - the awful mystery.

By "Awful" he didn't mean bad, he meant full of awe.

Sproul reminded me of a radio program I loved to listen to as a kid. It was called "The Inner Sanctum".

The music and sounds that introduced the program were eerie to say the least.

They were of a large and heavy door being opened into a secret place of danger.

"Inner Sanctum" means "within the holy".

“Holy” is mysterious and fear producing because it is so unknown.

It is so different from us - so “other” as to make us uncomfortable because we can’t fit it into what we know and can control.

God is Holy - He is so “other”, so different, so awe-provoking that we can’t safely categorize him.

“When we meet the Absolute, we know immediately that we are not absolute. When we meet the infinite, we become acutely aware that we are finite. When we meet the eternal, we know we are temporal. To meet God is a powerful study in contrasts.”
God compared to us. - The “Holy” compared to ourselves.

But the millions in heaven not only described God as “Holy” but also as “The Lord God Almighty.”

Again and again the term is used in the Bible to describe the unlimited power of God.

That power was displayed in the extrication of the Israelites from Egypt.

Time after time God controlled the forces of nature to display his power culminating in the Israelites dry-land crossing of the Red Sea.

He showed his power in the time of Joshua when without a hand laid to them, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

He showed his power when Jesus was here in the healing of the sick, the stilling of the stormy sea, and the resurrection from the dead of Lazarus.

And here in this glimpse into heaven we see the emphasis on the power of God in creation.

4:11 “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.”

Consider the great expanse of eternity before creation.

When nothing existed but God.

Before angels, before the world, before the stars or galaxies, before animals, dinosaurs, before everything except God.

God could create things however he chose.

He could call into existence a million different kinds of beings or he could create a million of the same .

He could make the heavens so vast that no one other than he could ever know the limits of it.

He could make some things so small and so intricate that nothing but the most powerful microscope could ever see it and then be left wondering if there were smaller particles still.

Why planets of different shapes, and stars of different brightness?

Why so many colors?

Why wind, why rain, why lightning?

Why animal diversity, why birds and fish in such variety?

Why does one plant flower a dozen times a year and another blossoms only once every hundred years?

Because God willed it!!

Psalm 135:6 "The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth..."

He is Holy, He is powerful and He is Eternal.

"...who was and is and is to come" they sang!

There has never been a time that God wasn't and there will never be a time that God isn't.

He will be there no matter what happens to everything else, because he is the uncaused cause and he just IS.

He called himself "I Am" - do you get it?

Lest we miss the point of the statement of the God "who was, and is and is to come"

John says in verse 9 "the one who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever."

And again in verse 10, "the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever."

Handel in the “Hallelujah Chorus” from the “Messiah” makes the same point gloriously when we are invited to sing the words,
 “Hallelujah, Hallelujah, for ever and ever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah - and he shall reign forever and ever and ever and Lord of Lords - hallelujah.

Never ever failing God.
 Majestic, Sovereign, Lord.

That’s the God who says to the Christians of the Apostle John’s day - “Trust me!”
 That’s the God who says to us - “Trust me!”

Do you believe in the sovereignty of God?

Gerald Sittser wrote that following the death of his wife, daughter and mother that night in Idaho “the issue of God’s sovereignty (was) no longer a mere abstraction to” him.
 (138)

He said that he had to deal with the idea that maybe God didn’t exist.
 Atheism or at least agnosticism was tempting - until he thought it through.

He wrote, “However difficult belief in God can sometimes be, belief in atheism is more difficult still... The trail of atheism I followed therefore led me right back to belief in God... “

He said he is still bewildered by aspects of the sovereignty of God.
 He has found no simple explanation for the ways of God.

But this was his conclusion of the matter:

“Loss may call the existence of God into question... In our pain we are tempted to reject God, yet for some reason we hesitate to take that course of action. So we move toward God, then away from him. We wrestle in our souls to believe. Finally we choose God... We decide to be in a relationship with God. And then we discover that God in his sovereignty, has already decided to be in a relationship with us.”

There are many reasons to believe in the sovereignty of God but I am convinced unaided human reason alone will never convince us -
God has revealed himself for who he is - He is the eternal, holy, all-powerful, sovereign God.

Do you trust him?
Will you?

As we face life and as we face the end of the age as described in this book of Revelation - when life unravels, our only anchor will be the sovereignty of God.