December 27/28, 2014

A Look Behind the Curtain

Revelation 4 and 5

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We are on the brink of a new year. In just a few short days our calendars will tell us that it is 2015. Probably most of us would like to know what 2015 has in store for us. Well, I can't predict that; neither can you. But I can predict that there are going to be times in 2015 where things just don't make sense to us; they're confusing. We are going to see rampant evil in the world, senseless violence. We will hear stories of brothers and sisters in Christ in China, in Sudan, in Middle East and elsewhere who are suffering greatly for their commitment to Jesus. While we might not suffer to that extent perhaps this year, you will suffer some form of persecution for your stand for Jesus—maybe lose a friend, suffer ridicule or mocking, maybe lose relationship with family members. It's those times when the world just doesn't make sense, and particularly for us as Christians, because for over two thousand years we have proclaimed that Jesus is King, that His kingdom is here and it's available for all. But yet we look at the world and it seems like the kingdoms and the powers of evil have the upper hand. It looks like anything but the fact that Jesus is reigning, and we struggle with that. We are going to encounter those times during 2015.

Well, we are not the only ones to ask those questions. Christians in the first century asked those very questions because they too had been told by the apostles, by followers of Jesus that He was King and that His kingdom was here and available. Yet all they could see was the fact that Caesar appeared to be king and the Roman Empire appeared to have the upper hand and ruled the world with a mighty fist. And they probably wondered too: Is it true that Jesus is King, that His kingdom is here, because all appearances in their daily lives seemed very different—because they were asked to pledge their allegiance to Rome and give their worship to the Emperor. They were asked to accept Roman imperialism, Roman exceptionalism, and if they didn't, they would suffer persecution. They were under pressure to give up their allegiance to Jesus in order to keep from suffering. And I can imagine they wondered: Is this whole kingdom stuff true?

The Apostle John writes to such first century Christians in the book of Revelation. He writes to them to encourage them to remain faithful witnesses to Jesus and His kingdom despite whatever persecution and evil they might face in this world. At the center of the book of Revelation is this grand vision in Chapters 4 and 5 that I would like for us to look at briefly this morning. So if you have a copy of the Scriptures, turn with me to the very last book of the Bible, Revelation, and we want to look at Chapters 4 and 5.

Just before this, in Chapters 2 and 3, John, in this letter, has given seven churches seven prophetic messages, and in each one of these he's encouraging them to remain loyal to Jesus despite what they might face. And I can imagine those readers are thinking, "*Well, how can I do that? It looks as if, again, Rome has the upper hand here. Why should I do this?*" But Chapters 4 and 5 in this grand vision, that I think are really the heart of the book of Revelation, without which I don't think the rest of Revelation makes much sense, gives them the reason. And I want you to think about it like this: Revelation 4 and 5, in the vision here, pulls back a curtain that separates heaven and earth and gives us a look at reality, gives us a look into heaven as to what is actually going on despite present appearances that evil is winning the day.

Now as we look at Revelation 4 and 5 in this vision, there are two things to remember. We are dealing with a kind of literature here that is highly symbolic, in that it wasn't intended for us to take

literally point by point. Now the truth behind the symbols we take literally and seriously, but the symbols themselves are just that; they represent other things. So notice that. Secondly, I believe that this vision in Chapters 4 and 5 isn't a vision about the future. It's not a vision about our life someday, sometime in the future, after Jesus returns. If it was, I don't see how that would be very relevant to those first century readers, who are wondering about their situation. Rather I believe that this vision in Chapters 4 and 5 is giving us a look behind the curtain as to what is going on in heaven in the present...today. And I think that would bring an answer, bring encouragement to those first century readers. After all, Revelation wasn't given to the seven churches as some code or puzzle to figure out. Rather it was given to them as a key to help them interpret the world around them that looked chaotic, looked like it was crashing in on them. And here, they *and* we get a look behind that curtain to see what reality really is.

So with that in mind, let's look at this vision briefly. We are not going to have time this morning to linger over all the details here. There's a class beginning in January on the book of Revelation. If you are interested to learn more, you can check that out. Chapter 4, John writes:

> **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 ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.** (*NIV, Revelation 4:1-3)

So here we are ushered into the throne room, the throne room actually of God Himself, although we are not specifically told that here. But later we discover that that's the case. This is God's throne room, and He's presented here as King of the universe. The reference to the precious stones here is a reference to the glory and majesty of a king. So we are reminded here that it wasn't Caesar who's king of the world but it is God who sits on the world's throne. He's the One with all glory and majesty, not the emperor Domitian. And we see a rainbow here that encircles the throne, that really reminds us although God is on the throne and is in position to judge the world, His judgment is tempered with mercy. We recall back to the time of Noah and God put a rainbow in the sky to remind Himself that He would never again judge the world as He had before. His judgment would be tempered with mercy. That's the picture we get here. So unlike Caesar, who judged the world with an iron fist and with oppression and violence and warfare, God's judgment will be tempered with mercy. Continue in verse 4:

> **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. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also in front of 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 its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:**
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> > **" 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,'**
> > **who was, and is, and is to come."** (Vs. 4-8)

So before the one seated on this throne, we have all this activity surrounding the throne. We have **twenty-four other thrones** with **twenty-four elders seated on the throne**, which probably would call to mind for those first century readers Caesar's council around him, and that was just a cheap parody of the God of the universe and His council around Him. The twenty-four elders sitting on the thrones here, I believe represent all of the saints, both from the Old and the New Testament who had passed on and were now in the presence of God. The twenty-four I believe coming from the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, this signifying the redeemed from both the Old and the New Testament. And they are reigning, sitting on thrones, reigning with the Ruler of the universe. In fact they also have the crowns signifying the same thing. They are wearing white robes, which I believe signifies victory. The Romans, after a grand victory, would celebrate. They did so in part by wearing their white togas and that's perhaps what's in mind here. But these are victorious ones who are ruling with the Ruler of the universe.

Furthermore, from the throne come the *lightning* and the *thunder* and the rumblings, all of this signifying the One sitting on the throne is the source of judgment. This very same language is used consistently in the book of Revelation to refer to God's final judgment. If you read on, you see it in the seventh seal, the seventh trumpet, and the seventh bowl—this exact same language signifying final judgment. Again, this reminds us that it is God, not Caesar, who will be the One to finally judge the world, who has that authority, who has that role.

Furthermore, there are these **seven lamps** blazing before the throne and, earlier in Revelation the seven churches were referred to as lamps. I believe here we have a representation of the churches before God. In other words they are represented in the heavenlies before God and His authority is over them as well.

And also in front of the throne, in verse 6, we have the **sea of glass,** *like crystal.* Now I differ here with many on what the sea of glass actually means. In the book of Revelation and elsewhere in the Scripture, the sea was commonly thought of as indicating the very presence and place of evil. Yes, you heard me right—the presence and the place of evil. In fact, in Revelation 21:1, after God finally judges the world and new creation is present, Revelation says there will be no more sea. I don't believe that means there's not going to be any oceans or large bodies of water in the new creation. Again, it's a symbolic way of saying there's not going to be the presence of evil in the new creation anymore. Well, what in the world would evil be doing here before God's throne? Again, remember we are dealing with symbolic language here in a vision. I don't think if we were actually going to see the throne of God that we would see a sea before Him. What this is depicting is that even though evil is present in the world, it is still under the authority of the sovereign God. He still has authority over evil and, in fact, such that this tumultuous sea is calm, looking like glass, and I'm reminded of Jesus calming the Sea of Galilee, which again I don't think primarily was to exhibit His grand power over the forces of nature, but I think it would symbolize in the minds of the people seeing that event and hearing that story that He had power and authority over the forces of evil. So before the throne, there's this sea, again representing the presence of evil, that God has authority even over that.

Furthermore, before the throne there are these four creatures; they are very odd creatures. They have all these wings and these eyes covering them; they have faces of different animals and so forth. Perhaps John here is combining the vision that Isaiah had in Isaiah Chapter 6 of the seraphim before God with all their wings, as well as Ezekiel's vision in Ezekiel 1 of these creatures. But what did they represent? What did these four creatures represent? I think they represent animate creation—that God is sovereign over the created order. So we have this creature that has the face like a lion, which would represent all of the wild beasts—the lion being the king of the beasts—and as we think

of the lion in the way they did as well. This creature that has the face of an ox, again they would think of the ox as the king of the domesticated animals, so here represents the domesticated animals of the world. We have one creature that looks like an eagle flying, again they would have thought of the eagle as being the king of the skies, and so all the living creatures and skies are represented here. Of course there's one creature that has a face like a human, again representing all of the humanity, the kings of the earth. So they too are before the throne, under the sovereign authority of the God of the universe. And these creatures who had the six wings and covered with eyes, notice: day and night they are giving unceasing worship to God; they never stop praising Him. They are doing what they were created to do. Continue in verse 9:

> **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:**
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> > **"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."** (Vs. 9-11)

These elders, again who lay their crowns before the throne, they are simply offering up their reigning and rulership before the sovereign King as an act of worship to Him and offering Him titles that the Emperor Domitian asked to be referred to him—Lord and God. The Emperor demanded people would call him that. But again we are shown here it's not Caesar; it's not the rulers of the world who are Lord and God, but it is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Bible, who is sovereign over all.

So as we think about Chapter 4, it's part of the answer to the question of how can we make sense of this world that looks chaotic, that looks like evil has the upper hand, and yet we are being told that Jesus is King, that God's kingdom is present and available. Well, John gives us a look behind that curtain, and then in Chapter 4 we see the reality is that it's not Caesar; it's not the rulers of the world; it's not the powers of evil who are sitting on the world's throne. It is God Himself. He's sovereign over His redeemed; He's sovereign over the animate creation; He's even sovereign over evil. He's sovereign over all. He's the world's King.

But it's one thing to know that God is sovereign over all and sitting on the world's throne, but we might still ask, "Okay, so what? There's still all of this evil; there's still this persecution; it still looks like the powers of evil have the upper hand. Is God even doing anything? Perhaps He's unconcerned. Okay, He's sitting on the throne, but what's He doing?" Chapter 5 addresses that very issue. So let's continue this vision. Chapter 5 verse 1:

> **Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."** (5:1-5)

So we have this scene now that the one who's sitting on the throne, God Himself, has the scroll. Some of your translations might have *book*; I think a better translation is **scroll**; we'll see that in just a moment. There's a scroll, and there's no one apparently who can open it, who can then read it.

Then John weeps and weeps and, if you were like me, when you read this before, you are probably thinking, "*Oh good grief, John, do we need to be so dramatic? Just because you can't see inside the scroll or hear what it is about, you are going to weep about this? Really? I mean, can we grow up just a little bit here? Is it really that tragic?"* Well, in fact, yes, it is. This scroll represented the edict or the judgment or pronouncement of a king. In the ancient days a king would offer an edict and it would be sealed up and when it was ready to be put in effect, then it would be opened and it would be read.

So we have this edict that's really the plan of God, this plan by which He will judge the world and judge evil in the world, where He will vindicate the righteous and He will bring redemption to the world. His plan is ready to be enacted. So why does John weep? Well, notice the call of the angel here in verse 2, "**Who's worthy to break the seal and open the scroll**?" is really a question that asks, "Who has the authority to execute this edict? Who has the authority to carry out this plan?" And the answer apparently is, "No one." And the reason that John weeps is because he knows if there's no one to execute the plan, that means that evil will not be judged, the righteous will not be vindicated, the world will not be redeemed. We should all weep if that's the case. But John is told that there is One who has the authority to carry out this plan, to execute this edict. It's **the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David**. We recognize the symbols here. This is a reference to the Messiah, King Jesus, who would be in the line of David, this promised One who would come and rescue God's people. He's able to open the scroll because He's triumphed. We will see in just a little bit what this triumph is all about. But continue on in verse 6:

> **Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. And they sang a new song, saying,**
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> > **"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,**
> > **because you were slain,**
> > **and with your blood you purchased for God**
> > **persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.**
> > **You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,**
> > **and they will reign on the earth."** (Vs.6-10)

I imagine John was greatly perplexed by what he saw. Notice he has just been told that the one who was worthy to open the scroll was the Lion from the tribe of Judah, a regal royal individual. But when he looks, he doesn't see a Lion; he sees a Lamb who was slain. I'm sure this puzzled John greatly—a humble Lamb who had been sacrificed. Now John wasn't looking at something different than what he was told. In fact the Lamb *was* the Lion; it's the same thing.

Again, this is common throughout the book of Revelation. For example, in Chapter 7 John is told to see that there are these 144,000, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. But when he looks, he sees the numberless multitudes from every nation and tribe and tongue. They are not two

different groups; they are one and the same. So too here, the Lamb is the Lion, and the Lion who is the Lamb is victorious, but not victorious in the way that perhaps Caesar was, through violence and war and oppression, but rather was victorious through suffering. That's how victory was gained. And because He was victorious through His suffering, He was qualified to open this scroll—in other words to carry out God's plan to judge the evil world, to vindicate the righteous and to bring redemption to the broken world.

And the response again of the creatures and the elders is significant. It's one of worship. Notice each one had a **harp** in verse 8, and a **golden bowl full of incense**, **the prayers of God's people.** These prayers aren't just any old prayers. Specifically they are the prayers of the suffering followers of Jesus, who are experiencing persecution—for God to vindicate them, to judge the world, and that's just exactly what Jesus is doing by opening the scroll.

The scroll I think is symbolic of the scroll in Daniel 12, where God told Daniel to seal up the scroll until a future time. Now that scroll is being unveiled; God's plan for redemption is being put into action. And there's great praise—they sing a new song. In the Old Testament, when God won victory over the enemies, the people sang a new song. If you remember the children of Israel, after being freed from Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, being delivered, what did they do? They sang. There's a song of victory. Here we have a song of victory in verse 9, again praising Jesus for what He achieved, for what He accomplished, that He was worthy to put God's plan into action. And He's presently doing so. Continuing in verse 11:

> **Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying:**
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> **"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,**
> **to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength**
> **and honor and glory and praise!"**
> **Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth**
> **and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:**
>
> **"To him who sits on the throne**
> **and to the Lamb**
> **be praise and honor and glory and power,**
> **for ever and ever!"**
> **The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.**
>
> (Vs. 11-14)

So whereas the first song in verse 9 praises the Lamb for what He has achieved, the second song in verse 12 turns attention to what the Lamb is due, what the Lamb should receive. And that's all praise and honor for what He has done and for what He is doing. And that is followed up by a song of praise that joins together praise for the Lamb *and* for the God who sits upon the throne.

So what do we have here in Chapter 5? As we get that look behind the curtain that separates heaven and earth, we see reality. We see that despite present appearances in the world that we experience, not only in Chapter 4 is God actually on the throne and sovereign over all, but Chapter 5 tells us He has a plan that He is carrying out through the person of Jesus to bring judgment to an evil world, to vindicate the righteous and to redeem the world—and that plan includes suffering.

Victory is achieved not through vengeance and revenge and violence and war, but through suffering—and that includes the suffering of God's people. And as they are given that look behind the curtain, they see that their suffering is not senseless; it's not meaningless. But their suffering is part of God's plan to bring justice to the world and to vindicate the righteous. Although that doesn't ease the pain of the suffering, but it makes sense of it. The apparent chaos in the world and the apparent victory of the forces of evil is just that; it's *apparent*. The reality is that God is on the throne and has a plan that He's working out that includes the suffering of God's people. Just as Jesus gained victory through suffering, so His people will be victorious through suffering as well.

Again, I don't know what 2015 is going to bring for you or me, for us as a church, but when those moments come that cause us confusion, bewilderment, despair, when it looks like the powers of evil are winning, that the kingdom of the world has the upper hand, that it doesn't look like God is doing much, we need to return to Revelation 4 and 5, and once again take that look behind the curtain to remind us of what the reality is—that God is on the throne and sovereign over all, even sovereign over evil and the forces over evil, and that He has a plan to judge the evil world, to vindicate the righteous, and to redeem the world. That plan is presently being carried out by His Son Jesus, who's qualified to do so. And that helps us to interpret, to make sense of the world that we live in, that is so chaotic. But we know the reality is that God is in charge; nothing is happening out of His control, and everything is going according to the plan.

But what should my response be in those times when it appears the world is crashing in on me, it appears that there's all this evil around me, or perhaps even times I'm suffering because of my commitment to Jesus? Well, through this vision in Chapters 4 and 5, we see what our response should be, and that is to worship. I closely link worship and allegiance. They are two sides of the same coin. We actually end up worshiping whatever it is we give allegiance to, and worship reveals ultimately where our allegiance goes. Too often we come to church on a Sunday; we worship for a little while but the rest of our week is spent in pursuit of agendas other than God's, maybe our own agenda, our company's agenda, our country's agenda, whatever agenda that might be. But that's just idolatry. We need to take a lesson from the worship scenes here in Revelation—that worship is unceasing. If you think worship is just a little time that we spend on a Sunday morning, you have a very impoverished view of worship. Worship is what we do moment by moment—everything I do in my work, in my leisure time, time with my family. Is it done out of loyalty and allegiance to Jesus or to someone or something else? It should be to Jesus, to His kingdom; that's where our loyalty goes. When we do that, we will be worshiping. Worship is the proper response. And my ultimate loyalty should not be to my school or to my business or to my sports teams or to my community or to my country or my family. Ultimate loyalty goes to Jesus and our worship should show that. And that's the response, as hard as that might be, when those times of confusion come; suffering comes; it looks like the world is caving in, that's when we worship because that's when we acknowledge that God is King. And how can we do that? It's because we've gotten a glimpse behind the curtain and we know that God is on the world's throne and sovereign over all, and we know He has a plan to vindicate the righteous, to judge the wicked, to bring redemption to the world and that plan is being carried out by His Son Jesus, the Lion who is the slain Lamb.

Eternal Father, we are grateful that it is You who is on the world's throne—the most competent King. That despite present appearances, that not only are You sovereign over all, but You are working out a plan to put this world right, and to bring us into the new creation. Lord, give us the wisdom and the strength to be able to be faithful witnesses to Jesus and His kingdom despite the pressures and the persecution and the tribulation and the difficulty and the evil that we will experience this year. And through all that, may we be people who are worshiping at every moment, demonstrating our loyalty to Your Son, in whose name we pray, and in the power of Your Spirit. Amen.

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