

AROUND THE THRONE. THE HEAVENLY WITNESS OF THE REDEEMED TO THE WORK OF THE LAMB

REVELATION 4-5

Conrad Mbewe

The church on earth is a persecuted and suffering church. It may experience seasons of rest, but the hatred of sinners against the church's Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, soon issues into a new wave of persecution and suffering. God's people during such seasons need a word of encouragement from God Himself. Both the Old and the New Testaments are full of such encouragements. I want us to see how the apostle John encourages us in Revelation 4, where he provides a vision of the crucified, risen, and exalted Christ to encourage the persecuted people of God in his own day.

These were difficult times for the church. It was as though evil was about to triumph. We, too, are going through incredibly difficult times as the church. The form of difficulty may differ between the church in America and Africa, or Asia and Europe. Yet the sense that evil may be triumphing is felt by us all. We, too, need a fresh vision of the crucified, risen, and exalted Christ so we may be encouraged.

Heaven's Throne Room

What did John see that we, too, are invited to participate in? John saw that no matter what is happening here on earth, God is still on the throne. You cannot miss this. As you make your way through this chapter, the word *throne* leaps from the sacred pages over and again:

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.”
(vv. 3–11; emphasis added)

That is precisely what we long for each time we go to church. We plead words similar to that in Doug Plank’s and Bob Kauffman’s song, asking for God to show us Christ and to reveal His glory!¹

The apostle John was probably the last surviving apostle at the time of writing this book. The friends and colleagues that he had labored with in the church probably either died from natural causes or had been martyred. History suggests that most of them were martyred. The book of Revelation was written in a time when the church was persecuted and most of its leaders were dead.

John took refuge on the island called Patmos. There the Spirit of God ministered to him by revealing the things of Jesus to him. “In the Spirit,” he saw the risen Lord and received letters for seven churches in Asia (chaps. 2–3). They were letters showing that even though the church was being persecuted, Jesus still expected them to live in faithfulness, holiness, and love toward Him. After recording the last of these letters, John gives us the vision we are interested in for our present purposes.

John begins, “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” (Rev. 4:1–2). This must have been quite a moving moment. He peeped into heaven itself. The only other person that we know of who had done this was the apostle Paul, who said he was forbidden to speak of what he saw there (2 Cor. 12:1–4). It must have been, for him, an overwhelming experience.

In Revelation 4, John not only saw what was happening in heaven but also was commanded to write what he saw. That’s why we have this record. Granted, the book of Revelation is full of symbolism, and there is much in this chapter that we must process with that reality in mind. The symbolism enabled John to capture and convey something of the atmosphere that he witnessed when he was given a peep into heaven. John desperately needed to see this because he needed encouragement. The church also needed encouragement and would get it once John shared what he had been uniquely privileged to see. We, too, need to see something of what John saw. As we unpack and meditate upon this chapter, may it put steel into our beings!

¹ Doug Plank and Bob Kauffman, “Show Us Christ” (Sovereign Grace Worship [ASCAP]/Sovereign Grace Praise [BMI], 2011).

What a sight! John, who was acquainted with seeing only the dirt and garbage of life on earth, had been given a view of the indescribable glory of the throne room of heaven. The word *throne* is used twelve times in this chapter alone, and we find it five times in chapter 5. The sight of that throne and Him who was seated on it must have overwhelmed John. Indeed, as Thomas Binney wrote in his hymn in 1826,

Eternal light! Eternal light!
How pure the soul must be
When, placed within Thy searching sight,
It shrinks not, but with calm delight
Can live and look on Thee

The spirits that surround Thy throne
May bear the burning bliss;
But that is surely theirs alone,
Since they have never, never known
A fallen world like this

O how shall I, whose native sphere
Is dark, whose mind is dim
Before the Ineffable appear,
And on my naked spirit bear
The uncreated beam?²

It was that “uncreated beam” that John saw. It was an indescribable glory emanating from the throne itself. Sadly, in today’s political dispensation, we have lost something of the majesty that surrounds a throne. It is a picture that perhaps a previous generation would have appreciated when reigning kings were really kings and reigning queens were really queens.

In Africa, we still have something of that earthly power and glory because authority is still vested in an individual. Therefore, you sense it when you visit a village headman or a chief. Yet you sense it even more if you ever have the opportunity to visit a paramount chief. You may not have the glitter and the splendor, but you sense an atmosphere that is truly overwhelming. To reach the throne of the paramount chief, you have to get past rows of headmen that surround the throne

and then past the rows of individual chiefs in their regalia. Then you go past the elders, whom we call *indunas*. Finally, deep within that dimly lit room, you find the paramount chief himself. You would have already been warned that you dare not look him in the face. You keep your eyes on the ground or, at the most, close to his feet. To look him in the eyes, once upon a time, was to invite death.

An African throne room is nothing compared to the infinite glory, splendor, and majesty that John saw. That was why the most he could do was provide comparisons. He said, “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” (4:3). He spoke of twenty-four thrones around this preeminent throne. On those thrones sat twenty-four elders in dazzling white garments and with sparkling golden crowns on their heads. From that exalted throne came flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder.

Can you sense something of what John experienced? Most of us can’t. Our presidents these days try to behave like guys you play around with. Not so with John. He beheld the throne room of the entire universe.

The message that John was getting out of all this is fairly clear. He was realizing perhaps more than ever before that whatever confusion was taking place on earth, someone was still ruling—God! We need to recapture something of this experience ourselves by reading passages like this. The God who is the eternal being, who knows neither beginning nor end, the ever-living One, Father, Son, the Holy Spirit, who existed before Genesis 1, was in a fellowship of mutual satisfaction with absolutely no need of anything outside Himself. He created everything that exists by His own will and for His own glory. He *rules* the universe.

In making the universe, He did not leave it in automatic motion. He controls all things. That is what a throne room is all about. It is the control center of an entire kingdom. That was what John was seeing here. He was seeing the One who not only knew all things but who created all things, including the very individuals that were wreaking havoc in and on the church. The God who was on the throne was unperturbed by all this because He ruled and controlled all things.

Notice that the twenty-four elders were sitting on thrones and wearing crowns as evidence that they were ruling at the next level. Notice that at the center of the throne room they bowed down and worshiped Him who sat on the throne. They also cast their crowns at His feet (4:10). That was meant to signify that the one being spoken of here is the paramount of all paramount chiefs, to use an African expression. He is the King of all kings, the Chief of all chiefs, and the President of all presidents.

This must have been a great encouragement to John as he realized that the one who is the monarch is not biting His nails, wondering what was going to happen

² Thomas Binney, “Eternal Light! Eternal Light!” (1826), Hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/eternal_light_eternal_light

to His chosen people. He is still in absolute sovereign control of all things and still being worshiped in heaven. We need to see that in view of the confusion all around us today. Our omnipotent God still reigns!

So when the church gathers to worship God, we engage in the most important activity of all creation. We join our voices to worship Him who is Lord of all.

Our Discouragements on Earth

The current impediments in the church on earth cause righteous souls to experience momentary anxiety. We see this happening to John at the beginning of chapter 5.

John was still “in the Spirit” when he wrote, “Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it” (Rev. 5:1–4).

John wrote here that he was anxious for the welfare of the church. He shed tears. He broke down and wept loudly. It was a real wail because the One seated on the throne had this scroll in His hands that no one could open. What was this scroll? Commentators have wrestled to understand it and have come up with various suggestions, some of which are more praiseworthy than others. It is important for us to admit that the Bible itself does not tell us what the scroll was—whether here or in any other passage. At least two aspects about the scroll are clear.

First, it pertained to what was going to happen after this. It was about the future. This is evident from the sequel. In chapter 6, the Lamb began to open the seven seals on the scroll, and what we see there is an unfolding of history. As each seal is opened, ramifications take place on the earth: A rider goes forth to conquer the earth, people begin to slay one another, national economies tumble; people die from famine, pestilence, and wild beasts; martyrs cry out for vengeance; and the final day of judgment arrives.

Second, whoever holds the scrolls determined the point in time when these events would take place. We see this clearly in chapter 6. It was only when the Lamb opens a seal that the respective events happen. Here is an example: “When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth

of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth” (Rev. 6:7–8). The one holding the scroll determines what would happen and when, between now and the final judgment. John was very concerned about this because he was anxious for the future of the church. As one of the very last initial leaders of the church, he was longing to see a better day and age for the church in the years that lay ahead.

It is nearly two thousand years since the book of Revelation was written, and the church has spread across the world. It is the largest religion. That’s why we fail to appreciate John’s anxiety, which caused him to weep loudly when he feared no one was worthy to open the scrolls (5:4). Imagine your country is in a state of war. Or remember World War II. Imagine that Adolf Hitler’s armies have invaded your land. Each morning, when you turn on your radio or television, one anxious question floods your mind: Who is winning this war? You read of various places that have been bombed, of ships that have been sunk, and of soldiers that have been killed. You are anxious about the future of your nation. Will you survive the war on the victor’s side? That was the state of mind and heart the apostle John had when he wrote this book. He wrote earlier, “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). It was a time of tribulation and patient endurance on account of the gospel.

The external circumstances were bad enough. Additionally, the internal state of many of the churches was a cause of concern, as is evinced in the letters to the seven churches (chaps. 2–3). The church in Ephesus had backslidden from its first love. In the church in Pergamum, where Antipas had been martyred, people were ascribing to the wrong teachings. In the church in Thyatira, a woman was leading many individuals to be sexually immoral. The church in Sardis had a reputation of being alive, but it was in fact dead. The church in Philadelphia had little power. The church in Laodicea was neither hot nor cold, and instead was “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (3:17). No wonder John was anxious about the future of the church.

In his first epistle, John wrote, “Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” (2:18–19). Individuals in the church were imbibing heresy and many of them were abandoning the church. John was now in the Spirit in heaven itself. He knew that the scroll in the hand of Him who sat on the throne had something to do with the future. He heard

the challenge that went out for someone to come forward and open the scroll by breaking its seals. As no one was coming forward, he wept loudly. His heart was broken.

Revelation 4 and 5 should not be taken as mere theory. Otherwise we miss an all-important issue. If you are a pastor or church leader, do the high levels of backsliding taking place in the pews and pulpits of the land not bother you? Do you not have sleepless nights sometimes as a result? Do you not ask God, “O Lord, where is all this going? Where are the voices faithfully sounding out the glorious message of the cross?” Do you not sometimes feel like Elijah before God, saying, “Oh, Lord, am I the only one left?” That was what John was going through. If we are truly godly in our souls and know something of spending time in the Word and in prayer, there ought to be times when our pillows are wet with tears because of this sad reality.

The Lamb's Victory in Heaven

John's longing was answered by the triumph of the crucified, risen, and exalted Christ. What John saw in the remainder of Revelation 5 spoke eloquently to him that the church's future was bright, despite its present setbacks. This is because the triumph of the church is tied up with Christ's triumph secured by His atoning work. This is captured for us as John's attention is drawn to the Lion of the tribe of Judah:

And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (5:5–6)

The language in this passage is incredibly deliberate. John was asked to look at the Lion of the tribe of Judah. When he looked, he saw a Lamb in a bad state—looking as if it had been slain. Also, notice the use of the number seven, which in this book stands for completeness. There are seven horns, seven eyes, and seven spirits. The Lamb is omnipotent and omniscient. He is omnipresent through His Spirit.

The Lamb did what no one else could do. “And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had

taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (5:7–8). The historic nature of this moment is hard to fully capture. The history of the universe hangs on it as much as it hangs on the moment when Jesus was crucified. This is the moment that all anxious souls waited to see. The response of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders is the equivalent of a full stadium that erupts in joy and excitement when a much-awaited goal is finally scored and the trophy is lifted. Yet even that pales into utter insignificance when compared to what took place when Jesus went forward to receive the scroll from Him who sat on the throne. You might as well compare an anthill to Mount Everest.

In 2017, the Zambian national soccer team won the Africa Cup—to the amazement of the entire continent. I missed the game because I went to bed early. However, when the final whistle was blown and our team won, I could not sleep. In one moment, the whole nation burst forth in shouts and songs to the sound of loud drums. Car horns could be heard everywhere. It was incredible. When the team captain was handed the trophy, the noise was deafening. I thought the nation had gone mad. Again, that was nothing compared to the moment captured John in this passage.

One hymn-writer captures it so well:

Look ye saints the sight is glorious
See the Man of Sorrows now
From the fight returned victorious
Every knee to him shall bow
Crown him, crown him!
Crowns become the victor's brow.

Hark, those bursts of acclamation
Hark, those loud triumphant chords!
Jesus takes the highest station;
O what joy the sight affords!
Crown him! Crown him!
King of kings, and Lord of lords!³

³ Thomas Kelly, “Look, ye saints; the sight is glorious” (1809). Hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/look_ye_saints_the_sight_is_glorious.

The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders bowed to the Lamb. They are the closest to the throne. And from that epicenter, the adulation goes outward like a mighty wave until it engulfs the whole universe.

First, you have the four living creatures and the elders. "And they sang a new song, saying, '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 for every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth'" (5:9–10). Then we have the next ring around the throne, comprised of millions of angels. John records, "Then I looked and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing'" (5:11–12). Finally, the wave reaches the outer ring, and John records, "And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'" (5:13).

John ends by going back into the throne room and to the first circle of thrones around the throne of God to see their reaction to all this. He says, "And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshiped" (5:14). What a sight! Jesus was being acknowledged as victor because He was slain (5:6, 9, 12). Calvary was not a mere product of the miscarriage of justice. It was not an afterthought in the mind of God. Jesus was the Lamb of God that was slain from before the foundation of the earth. In the eternal counsel, God the Father and God the Son had entered into a pact of redemption. In that pact, the Son was to undergo humiliation by taking on Himself the form of man and suffer until finally He would hang on a cross to bear the full penalty for our sin.

In undertaking this, the Son of God carried a heavy weight on His heart. Nothing shows this more than what Jesus went through in the garden of Gethsemane on the eve of His crucifixion. The shadow of Calvary fell upon His soul and He recognized that in a few moments He would bear upon Himself the guilt and the punishment we deserved. He knew that He was about to drink in hell on our behalf. He paused and prayed, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39). He knew He was about to suffer the consequences of our sins. The righteous God, whose throne must remain righteous and holy, had come up with this plan.

There was no other way that sinners would be allowed into His eternal presence. Jesus paid the price. He ransomed us. He purchased our souls with His own blood. When He said, "It is finished," it was done, and He died. The Father

had promised an elect people for His Son. He had promised a throne from which He was going to rule to bring in His elect people. He was to be on the driving seat of history. This is what the apostle John was given an opportunity to witness. To John, this was a most glorious sight. He was realizing afresh that in the midst of all the confusion, the backsliding, and the persecution that was taking place, evil was not going to triumph. The Son of God was reigning over all. John had the opportunity to see this, and it was a real game-changer, as we say. From this point onward, it is simply one seal after another being broken by the Lamb. He is in charge.

Conclusion

Redemption is not primarily about us, and our frail attempts to better our lot. It is about God, and His plan and power, as these two chapters in Revelation eloquently show. Jesus was slain, and by His blood He ransomed a people for God. Therein lies the future of the church. It is in the finished work of Christ on Calvary. This is why we must preach Christ.

We must preach the preexistent, the humiliated, and the exalted Christ. Christians need to hear about and feast on Him so their souls may overflow with Him. Are we doing that? Too many pulpits are full of nothing but motivational speaking. Sermons consist of little more than stories of individuals that are larger than life, told to inspire those who are giving up. The stories are meant to encourage us to pursue the success that others have pursued and achieved. But what are those individuals compared to the King of kings and Lord of lords? Jesus Christ is the truly victorious one. And through His victory we, too, are victors.

We need to center our thoughts on Him who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and the firstborn from among the dead. We need to read passages like this and feel as though we have been caught up in the third heaven, seeing what John saw—the Lamb who was slain, taking the scroll and taking charge of history. It would make a great difference in our lives as we face a world that hates us and the truth of God. Yes, it would make a great difference as we lie on our deathbeds awaiting entrance into the glory. We would walk through the valley of the shadow of death with a defiant peace. May God help us to see, as John saw, the triumph that lies ahead. We are on the winning team!