

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: A few months ago a friend and I went to see the latest Batman movie, *The Dark Knight*. He insisted we had to see it in IMAX. An IMAX screen is over 50 feet high and over 70 feet wide, curved a bit, and it pulls you in like a visual vacuum. That movie is loud and intense. The “dark knight” (k-n-i-g-h-t) is Batman, of course, but the movie also pulls you into a *dark night* (n-i-g-h-t). Starless skies, dark streets, shadowy looming buildings, sinister and scary characters, and wild chaotic action—chases and crashes—all huge and loud and swallowing. When it was over and we walked out into the ordinary evening, it took awhile to get reoriented; to quiet my pulse rate and give my eyes permission to slow down!
- B. As Christians, we are drawn into a dark world the way that IMAX screen drew me into the movie. The sinister darkness envelopes us, pounds at us, frightens us, tempts us, pretends to be our environment. But since coming to Christ, that is *not* our reality. We no longer belong to this dark world. Paul told us, “*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.*” [Eph 6:12; 5:8] But living as children of light isn’t so easy, is it?
- C. When the church was young, it also was surrounded by a dark and oppressive world. In the last days of the first century—say 90 AD—Christians were eyed with dark suspicion. The Apostle John was the last surviving disciple of Jesus. He lived in Asia Minor (western Turkey today). There were churches in virtually every city by that time, but they were way out of synch with the Roman culture around them. In some cities, Christians were persecuted. Some had been martyred. John himself was exiled to the little island of Patmos, far from the churches he loved and pastored. Then, one Sunday morning, he had a vision, stunning and sweeping. Jesus in all his glory appeared!
- D. When Jesus spoke, he spoke to the seven prominent churches of Asia Minor. He encouraged them and he scolded them. He named names and he looked into their hearts. Some were warm and devoted, but some had lost their first love for him or had grown tepid in their faith. They were all under pressure in one way or another from the dark culture around them.
- At the center of that culture was the Roman Caesar. In the minds of the Christians’ neighbors, Caesar was a god. He was at the center of the Roman Empire, and the Roman empire, to their way of thinking, ruled the world. Domitian, the Caesar from 81 to 96 AD, liked to be called “our lord and god.” Coins from his time show him on a throne and named “father of the gods.” There were temples to the Caesar in each city. All citizens were expected to say, “Caesar is lord.” They were expected to pray to him—for good crops, for example. And when Christians refused, and the crops weren’t good, imagine the blame that came to the followers of Christ. How could Christians keep their balance in a dark world like that?
- E. As Christians today, we are also under pressure to bow to the Caesars of our age. If we do not adopt the moral stands of the world around us we’re accused of hate speech or of being “angry fundamentalists.” We’re expected to keep our God discretely out of sight and to pour our energies into our jobs or entertainment. And the temptations to every kind of sin cool our love for Christ who saved us. How are we to keep our balance in a dark world like this? Turn to **Rev. 4**.
- F. Jesus ended each of his declarations to those seven churches with a promise of great reward to those who overcome the world. To the last of those churches, and the one in greatest danger, Laodicea, he says in **Rev. 3:21**, “*To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.*” And then, to our wondering eyes, he opens the door of heaven, and shows us that throne. The word, *throne*, is central to this whole book. In Rev. 4 it appears 13 times! But the point we are not to miss is this: **In this dark, disorienting world, the Christian’s hope starts at God’s throne.** Chapters 4 and 5 go together, but this morning we’ll focus on chap. 4. Here there are no apocalyptic battles. Here, in this chapter, is a vision of God upon his throne.

It is here, because Christians need to know—need to see and hear—that our God reigns! Here the Christ says to us, *“Be silent and know that I am God; the LORD Almighty is here among us.”* **This chapter asks us to come to God’s throne and do two simple things: look and listen.** First, in vv.3-8...

I. IF WE ARE TO OVERCOME, WE MUST LOOK TO GOD ON HIS THRONE (vv.3-8a).

As John records his vision, he has us looking back and forth, you might say, first to the glorious beings, and then to some phenomenon around the throne.

A. First, we’re given a glimpse of the God’s beauty (v.2-3). John tells us that no one has ever seen God, except in Jesus, and we don’t really see God here. But we see something of his stunning glory, portrayed in mysterious, light-diffused colors which reminded John of precious stones he had seen. These precious stones are hard to picture very specifically. **Jasper**, which is referred to several times in Revelation, is often an opaque reddish stone, but one reference gives us the impression that John saw something more like a diamond. **Carnelian** is a fiery red stone, and **emerald**, of course, is green. John didn’t see these stones, you understand, but the colors he saw in his vision were like what he’d seen in these stones. When you remember that *“God is light,”* these images are mind-boggling.

Ezekiel had a very similar vision to John’s here, recorded in **Ezek. 1:26-28**: *“Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.”*

B. Now we turn to see the 24 elders who attend to God (v.4). Later **v.10** tells us what they do... No one knows for sure who these 24 elders are, nor whether they are human or angelic, though I found the arguments for their being heavenly beings most persuasive. The fact that they are on thrones and have crowns indicates that they are rulers in the kingdom of God. Their position, encircling the throne of God surely indicates that they are of the highest realm of heavenly rulers; having great power and authority. What’s more, they function like priests, bearing our prayers to God. The next chapter (5:8) tells us, *“Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”* These mighty rulers readily and heartily bow before God, and lay their crowns before him to signal their submission to him.

C. Now we look again to God’s throne – v.5a... These exact words describe what it was like when God came down to deliver the Law on Mt. Sinai, and will be used several more times in this book. Bryan Kane told me this description reminds him of *“a summertime crack and explosion of the sky that stirs fear in everyone because they can feel it in their bones.”* It is as if even the holy atmosphere of heaven is percussive and charged with the presence of God.

D. Back again to a mysterious Attendant in v.5b... These seven lamps or torches are the seven-fold Spirit of God; not really seven distinct spirits, but one perfect Spirit. In other words, this is a depiction of the Holy Spirit. Seven is a signal of perfection, which is tied to **Isaiah 11:2** which describes how God’s Spirit, possessing seven perfect qualities, will be on the Messiah: *“The Spirit (1) of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit (2) of wisdom and (3) of understanding, the Spirit (4) of counsel and (5) of power, the Spirit (6) of knowledge and (7) of the fear of the Lord.”* All this to say that God’s Holy Spirit attends to God, ready to do his will in the world.

E. Now, in v.6: “Before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.” Ezekiel saw it this way, *“Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome.”* Dr. Carson reminds his students that in John’s day, glass was not flat and flawless like ours today. It was wavy and more irregular, yet transparent. This “crystal sea” is like a holy moat—setting God apart even from other parts of heaven.

F. V.6b-8a takes us again back to another group who attend to God... It is always interesting to me that we can't find any other language to describe these beings except "living creatures," and they are mysterious indeed. No one knows for sure what they symbolize or signify. In Ezekiel's vision, each creature had all four faces, one on each of four sides. How mind-boggling is that! The faces of lion, ox, man and eagle may indicate that they are representatives of all that "*is noblest, strongest, wisest and swiftest in God's creation*" [Osborne, p.234]. The eyes everywhere surely signify that they observe all that happens and all the works of God.

SUMMARY: John will see more, but that is enough for now. It is enough for us who wonder if the governors and Caesars of this world are going to get away with their arrogant plans. It is enough to strengthen those who have put our hope in God, who believe that he is the King, that he will have the last word, that he is able to set all things right in his good time. It is therapy for the soul for us to look on these pictures of God's glory in the visions of John and Ezekiel, Moses and Isaiah and Daniel. **In this dark, disorienting world, the Christian's hope starts by looking at God's throne.** But we do not only *look* in this vision. We also *listen*: **vv.8b-11...**

II. IF WE ARE TO OVERCOME WE MUST LISTEN TO THE HYMNS OF HEAVEN (vv.8b-11).

Imagine the believers in those seven churches, pressured to say publicly, "Caesar is lord," with prison or death as the consequence for refusing. "*What's the harm?*" some must have wondered. "*Only words,*" others must have thought. Today we are not pressured so much to worship another god, as to downsize the God who is; to make him vastly open-minded and flexible, to size him to our liking and morality. So we're brought into this holy vision in order to listen and learn.

A. The mighty worshippers of heaven sing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." Could you say *that* to your Caesar—your governors and mayors and CEOs and celebrities—with their selfish excesses and dirty hands and lips; who put their pants on one leg at a time just like us; who build their tombs big, but die the same as everyone else? We Christians sing of our holy God who is perfect in every way, infinite, sinless, good, just, loving, even humble! Our God, who existed forever, who is alive right now among us, and who will never cease to be. *He* is our King! *He* is our Lord. What can any Caesar do to us!?

B. The mighty worshippers of heaven sing, "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." Our world's little Caesars and heroes want glory, but they are not worthy of it. Not for long, not very much; even the best and noblest of them. But our God! All these mighty beings of heaven, joined by all the angelic hosts, joined by every person who has ever lived, joined by all the creatures of the sea, earth and sky, all singing together could not give him **glory** adequate to his deeds and character! The 24 elders may lay their crowns before him, and so, in time, may all the kings of all the earth's history, but that would not be **honor** enough for our King. If every creature in heaven and earth could bend our skills and muscle and will to God's service that would not be a **power-gift** significant enough for our King.

Why? Because he created everything—all that is seen and unseen, these mind-boggling creatures in this vision and these phenomena which John glimpsed, the solar systems just coming into the focus of our strongest telescopes, the beauties of creation we've each enjoyed, and the tiniest particles of mind-numbing dimensions—all this God made, and he made it out of nothing, because he willed to. He wanted to. That's all. That's why we are here! And that is the only reason we've lived into this day, or why our world hasn't simply vanished. **Because God wants all he has made and he sustains it all by his will.**

Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters, this is a picture we must memorize. That we must think about. T. S. Eliot used a phrase in one of his poems, *"the still point of the turning world."* That is God's throne. If we do not come to God's throne to look and listen, this dark world will swallow us up.

And **that is why we worship him here in this place this morning**. Others can sleep in, or sip coffee while reading the paper, or click away on their laptops, but we have come to worship, because that is what they do in the highest heaven, because that is what we were made for and will do when we are whole and home, because that is how we keep our balance in this dark night of a world.