

A MESSAGE FROM HEAVEN

Revelation 4:1-11

DESPAIR

One of the characteristics of our society and even our local community today is the sense of despair felt by many. People are in personal and financial difficulty as a result of the recession. Families are under pressure from marriage break-ups, broken relationships. People question traditional values of morality; even the very existence of God.

WOOLWICH

Even this week we have seen barbarism on the streets of our capital – and done in the name of religion.

And all this filters into the church of God, bringing questions about life and about faith.

CHRISTIANS OUTSIDE PARLIAMENT

In a world where so many things seem depressing and even the church is under attack (we've seen that this week too); where's hope?

TITLE

Last time we started to have a look at the picture John gives us of the throne room of God. In the Spirit he was taken there and we can see from the vividness of the imagery that it was an emotionally overwhelming experience. But John saw imagery he could relate. It was given to him to be a message from God to churches who were suffering from persecution and also attack at the very foundations of their faith. Revelation, like most other Bible prophecy isn't just a message about the future, but a message about the present. Just as it was a message to the seven churches of Asia, it is also a message to us.

It's designed to lift God's people who are feeling depressed, defeated, confused, unsure and to affirm that each child of God shares in the hope God glory and can and should reflect that glory in their lives right here.

Now, explanations of passages like this be very fanciful – so I am going to stick with what I feel are scriptural rather than speculative explanations. For strange passages like this, the best place to look for explanation is elsewhere in the Bible because the pictures mean something. These words and any other vision of heaven is there for our benefit; for us who are firmly anchored and rooted in Jesus Christ and in His word.

The message from heaven in Revelation seems to split into five themes:

A MESSAGE OF GLORY

A MESSAGE OF PROMISE

A MESSAGE OF EMPOWERMENT

A MESSAGE OF AUTHORITY

A MESSAGE OF WORSHIP

A MESSAGE OF GLORY

Last time we looked at verses VERSES 2 & 3: *there in heaven was a throne with someone sitting on it. 3 His face gleamed like such precious stones as jasper and carnelian, and all around the throne there was a rainbow the colour of an emerald.* We found that the gemstones represented the people of God and as a covenant people we are precious to God and in Christ, He has given us life, hope and refreshing. As the gemstones reflected the glory of the throne, we are people that should reflect the beauty and the glory of the One who sits on the throne. As we face the pressures of life it reminds us of just who we are to the One that sits upon the throne – precious.

So this brings us to the next part of the message from heaven.

A MESSAGE OF PROMISE > VERSE

4 In a circle around the throne were twenty-four other thrones, on which were seated twenty-four elders dressed in white and wearing crowns of gold.

Who are the elders and why 24? Theologians have made plenty of punts as to what this is all about. For me, looking at this again in the context of John's readers leads me to go with what most commentators go for to. The elders represent the people of God figuratively represented by the 24 – the saints of old based on the twelve sons of Israel and the saints of the new covenant symbolised by the 12 apostles. At this point they would all represent those who have already gone before and they are in white robes and enthroned. They are honoured by God, placed in an exalted position and given crowns to wear.

The message is simple: God honours all those who are His people. It is the message of the NT, this time given in the form of this vivid picture of 24 elders.

We can spell it out in the words elsewhere in the NT which most of us will know well.

VERSE Romans 8:17 *Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

VERSE James 1:12 *Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*

We are His people, we are to share in His glory. God awards us His highest honour in Christ. “

VERSE 1 Tim 2:11,12 *If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.*

That's what this picture is about. It's the promise of God. If we're down, depressed, feeling like a loser then know this – in Christ we are people who are going to be exalted, crowned, glorified. We are already the children of God. The call is to start living in the reality of that because it makes a big difference to how we walk through life for just knowing it, because it replaces hopelessness with hope.

Let's move on. The message for heaven is also.

A MESSAGE OF EMPOWERMENT

5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. In front of the throne seven lighted torches were burning, which are the seven spirits of God. 6 Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

John recalls the throne room as a place that is fulfilled with shock and awe – thunder, lightning. Expressions of power. This also reflects the Old Testament description of Mount Sinai where God was present. It was associated with lightning and thunder indicating the power and presence of God. Yet littl o'l John was entitled to be there, fit to be there – because He was on God's side – it was the Holy Spirit who had brought him there. Hold that thought.

What is more mystifying is the reference to the seven spirits of God? What's that about? Actually this is the second time it appears in Revelation. VERSE Rev 1:4 *From John to the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace be yours from God, who is,*

who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits in front of his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first to be raised from death and who is also the ruler of the kings of the world.

This gives the clue. John refers to the Father and Son and in this kind of statement in the NT we would usually expect to find the Holy Spirit referred to but here we see a reference to seven spirits. It's a unique term to John in Revelation and is an unusual but certainly a reference to the Holy Spirit. Why seven? Let's use scripture to interpret scripture by looking at Isaiah 11:1.

Isaiah 11:1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. 2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- 3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

The Spirit of the Lord is described in seven ways in relation to the Messiah and the way the Messiah is endowed with the presence and power of God.

There's another aspect to this. In Zechariah 4 the prophet is given a vision of seven lamps representing (v6) *the eyes of the LORD that search all around the world.*" This echoes also with the fact that in Revelation the Holy Spirit was giving a message to each of the churches. It is the Holy Spirit that brings not just the message to the churches but He's the Spirit *of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.* He's the Spirit that brings God to us, wherever we are. And He's the Spirit who brings us right into the presence of God.

So the seven torches represent the way in which in this case the seven churches were being both represented by the Holy Spirit

There's a bit I missed, what about the other feature of the throne. It was surrounded by something that looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

6 Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

What was it and what's the message in it? A sea of glass, clear as crystal. Actually glass in those days wasn't clear. It was very difficult to get pure glass as clear as crystal. But if you've visited some parts of the world, you will know that sometimes that the where you have pure clear water, it looks like a sea of glass, as clear as crystal. Beautiful when you see it too.

The sea was beautiful, pure, but it was a barrier to approaching the throne. Why? For the human race, the throne of God is barred because God is a pure and holy God, unsullied by sin. They can't get there.

Now back to that thought I asked you to hold. Where was John? For that matter where were the elders which represent the people of God? They were on the throne side of the sea, not on the other. They were around the throne.

The message of Revelation 4 is that for the people of God, the message is that the Spirit enables and empowers us to be what we should be in Christ. We are people that have a right to be around God, in His presence.

Ever feel inadequate, unworthy to be that close to God. Don't be. In Christ you have every right to be in the presence of God. You are holy, acceptable to Him. As the Spirit to confirm that to you. Pray daily until it is. It's who you are in Christ. Allow the Spirit to empower you to truly be who you are.

A MESSAGE OF AUTHORITY

Surrounding the throne on each of its sides, were four living creatures covered with eyes in front and behind. 7 The first one looked like a lion; the second looked like a bull; the third had a face like a human face; and the fourth looked like an eagle in flight. 8 Each one of the four living creatures had six wings, and they were covered with eyes, inside and out. Day and night they never stop singing: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, and who is to come."

Mysterious beings. There are various descriptions of mystical beings in visions of heaven. There are the seraphim of Isaiah 6 and the cherubim of Ezekiel 10. We know that there is a whole spiritual world associated with God a world of angelic beings. These aren't any old creatures though, they are around the throne. The appearance of these winged creatures varies between prophecies which would suggest that rather than having an extremely unusual appearance, the description of eyes, faces and wings describes what they are like as beings rather than a literal description. So what are they like?

- they know a vast amount. How do I know that? Because they have eyes all over – they can see just about everything everywhere. They also have wings. What do wings do? Allow you to travel further and see more. So they've been around, got lots of experience.

- and the faces? Each of the four has a different face: a lion, an ox, a man, an eagle. Each face represents the apex of life on Earth. The lion is the apex predator of carnivores, powerful, agile. The ox is at the apex of domesticated animals, versatile, productive. The eagle is at the apex of what flies and as the lion is powerful and agile. And human beings are of course at the apex of all created life on Earth. The beings around the throne know all about creation and their appearance represent creation. But despite the powerfulness of the part of creation they represent they still do this: *Day and night they never stop singing: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, and who is to come."*

These beings are the highest, the most knowledgeable beings of all creation. But at the throne they recognise the power and authority of God and worship Him.

Why is this in the message from heaven? Because we as God's people even today, like the saints in the seven churches of Asia are under constant attack by those who promote how great the human race and question the existence and authority of God. Whenever we face difficulties we may question God. We depend on ourselves and our own resources. We do our own thing and God has His place.

John sees this and the message is – take it from the most powerful created beings around the throne of God. However great you may think you are, you're nothing compared to the power and authority of God. Submit to Him as these beings do.

A MESSAGE OF WORSHIP

9 The four living creatures sing songs of glory and honour and thanks to the one who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever. When they do so, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before the one who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives forever and ever.

They throw their crowns down in front of the throne and say, 11 "Our Lord and God! You are worthy to receive glory, honour, and power. For you created all things, and by your will they were given existence and life."

But it isn't just the winged creatures who worship the one who sits upon the throne. It's the elders too – it's all the saints of God in glory. They know and realise just who God is and what do they do – they cast their crowns before him. Kings of vassal states always surrendered their crowns to the king who ruled the empire. It was an act of fealty recognising the authority of the emperor over them. Although God exalts His people in glory, they recognise His authority and worship Him by placing themselves entirely at His disposal.

And us? *"Our Lord and God! You are worthy to receive glory, honour, and power. For you created all things, and by your will they were given existence and life."*

To conclude the message from the throne room is a

A MESSAGE OF GLORY

A MESSAGE OF PROMISE

A MESSAGE OF EMPOWERMENT

A MESSAGE OF AUTHORITY

A MESSAGE OF WORSHIP

At a time when the world is a depressing place and when there are many pressures on our lives we have to remember that we are a people of glory. That is what we are destined for. That's what we are part of now. We are people who God has honoured in Christ. If you know Jesus as Saviour and Lord, that's you right now, despite how you may feel about yourself. We are a people of promise.

We are a people of empowerment. When we feel so weak, insignificant, troubled, depressed – the Spirit empowers us because He's the Spirit of the Lord, *the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.*

We are a people of authority. Not ours – God's. Let's submit to Him and let His will be done in our lives, because when that happens, everything changes, we change, the church changes, the world changes. Right now the world needs the change only Jesus can bring. Do we want to see revival. Revival starts with you and it starts with me believing that we are a people of authority and it's in Jesus name and by His will that the world is changed.

Finally we are a people of worship. The message begins with glory and ends with us giving God glory. We may not understand the minutiae of the picture given here in Revelation, but the message from heaven is a clear one – and it's for now. God wants us to start acting like what He's made us – an outpost of heaven!

TITLE

Prayer