

Behind the Seen

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[0 : 0 0] That's page 1,236. 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.

Surrounding the throne were 24 other thrones and seated on them were 24 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 centre round the throne were four living creatures and they were covered with eyes in front and behind. The first living creature was like a lion. The second was like an ox.

[1 : 1 1] 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 round, even under its wings.

Day and night, they never stopped saying, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come. Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the 24 elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever.

They lay their crowns before the throne and say, You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power. For you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being.

Our second reading of the evening is from Revelation chapter 5, continuing where we left off earlier on page 1236. That's page 1236, Revelation chapter 5.

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?

[2 : 3 6] 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.

Then I saw a lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre 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, 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.

[3 : 52] You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth. Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands and ten thousand times ten thousands.

They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying, 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 forever and ever.

The four living creatures said amen and the elders fell down and worshipped. Thanks, Robbie, for reading.

And great to see you. If we've not met before, I'm Martin, the lead pastor here. And it's my privilege to be taking us through this chapter, Revelation 5, in our series in Revelation. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet, if you'd find that helpful, as we just follow along the shape of these two chapters, but particularly focused on chapter 5 tonight.

[5 : 09] And it's great to ask for God's help. We need his help if we're going to hear him rightly. So let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer that's just based on what we read in Revelation chapter 1, just a few weeks ago.

We call upon you, God, who is and who was and who is to come.

And we praise you that you gave this revelation to your son, Jesus Christ, and that he made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John, who testifies to us about everything he saw.

We ask that you would open our ears tonight to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, and that we will take to heart what is written here so that we might receive the blessing that you promise, because the time is near.

And we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder if you've thought before what it might be like to live in a country where you can't access truth.

[6 : 14] Some of you will have had that experience, just thinking about where people in our church family have lived. But there are countries in the world where the state controls the media and where there are lies kind of infiltrated down to the people.

So the people are left in the dark as to what's really going on. And it's disturbingly common through history and around the world for that to happen, that you could find yourself living in a country where you're given misinformation.

It happened in the Second World War. If you were living in Nazi Germany, everything that you could see around you spoke of the power of the Nazi army and of the Third Reich.

And the national news made you think that anything other than Nazi world domination was unthinkable. The Nazi advance was inevitable. Nazi victory was inescapable.

So the BBC from Britain started broadcasting in German to Germany on the radio at that time. And it meant that if you were in Germany, there was an alternative.

[7 : 20] You could go home and in private, in secrecy, you could tune in your radio to listen to the truth, a different story about what was going on at the time, reliable information from outside about what was really going on.

Now for us, Revelation chapters 4 and 5 show us that spiritually speaking, our situation is not so different to that. Day by day, the message that we hear from people all around us is that what you can see is all that counts.

There is nothing else that is relevant to your life than the material. In fact, lots of people we would hear saying that the material universe is all that there is.

There is nothing else to think about. But in these chapters, the Apostle John, a close follower of Jesus, who says in one of his letters that he saw Jesus with his own eyes and touched him, he was with him, he was given access in a vision to the hidden reality behind what we see today.

We can believe it because of who Jesus showed himself to be. The witnesses of his earthly life, the apostles and the followers of Jesus, testify to us about Jesus so that we can believe a revelation like this.

[8 : 43] And later in life, John was given this revelation from Jesus of heaven now and of what is to come. And chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation are like the hinge on which the whole book turns.

Already in chapters 2 and 3, we heard letters from the risen Jesus to churches. And they are like the application section of the book because they prepare us as Christians for how we're meant to live today and the kinds of issues we might face while we wait for Jesus to return as he's promised to do.

And in them, Jesus promises a wonderful future from him and with him for everyone who will patiently endure, who keeps holding on to what we have from Jesus faithfully and who keeps loving him.

There's this great future that he promises. And from chapter 6 onwards in the book, we're going to hear a continued revelation of things that are coming soon to our world.

But in between those letters and promises and the words about what's coming, we get these two chapters. And we get a setting in chapter 4 and then a drama in chapter 5.

[10 : 00] So the scene is set in chapter 4 and it's about a throne at the center of heaven. John gets brought to a breathtaking place. If you just have a look with me again at chapter 4, verse 1.

After this, I looked and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had heard, first heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, come up here and I will show you what must take place after this.

So just imagine you're in the position that John is in here because in a sense, as we've got this book, we're all in that position with John tonight.

Picture before you an open door and if you go through the door, you will see into heaven and what it's like. Heaven itself, ultimate reality.

Would you go through the door? If we're people who are sincerely searching for truth, if we want to live our lives by the truth, we want to go through that door, don't we?

[11 : 05] And see reality. This is the kind of the red pill, blue pill moment in The Matrix. If you've never seen that film, The Matrix, or you've not seen it for years, in The Matrix, the main character, Neo, gets given a choice between taking a red pill and a blue pill.

And if he takes the blue pill, he will stay in the contented experience of ordinary life. Life as we see it all around us. But if he takes the red pill, he will wake up in the real world and see the real truth, however unsettling that might be.

The actual life-changing truth of what's really going on. And so it is here for John that if we choose the red pill, we're choosing to allow God to reveal to us the spiritual truth of what's going on right now, behind the scene, behind what we can see.

And the big idea, as we heard last week, as we had Rob with us explaining Revelation 4, is that John sees a throne in heaven. If you look down again at chapter 4 and just scan your eyes down, repeated 10 times in the chapter is the word throne.

Verse 2 is the first example. Once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one on the throne, he says, is majestic in verse 2.

[12 : 28] So he says he has the appearance of jasper and ruby, two immensely precious stones. And there's a rainbow encircling the throne, which is, the rainbow was God's gift to us, a symbol of God's mercy and his faithfulness around the throne of his holy justice.

And the Holy Spirit is there. In verse 5, it talks about the seven blazing lamps that are the seven spirits of God. So a reference there to the Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

And before the throne, there is this sea of glass that is completely calm, clear as crystal, to signify to us that God is completely in control of his creation.

And heaven is a place of worship. So surrounding the throne are these magnificent, angelic beings. There are 24 thrones with 24 elders on them, probably angels, but representing the people of God, 12 tribes of Israel, 12 apostles leading the people of God.

And they cast their crowns before the throne. And before the throne are four awesome angels, these incredible creatures whose likenesses are the symbols of imperial power, creatures who rule.

[13 : 41] So there's the lion, and the lion rules the wild, and there's the ox, and the ox rules the livestock, and there's the eagle, and the eagle rules the skies, and there's man who rules creation on behalf of God when things are right.

And these creatures of supreme strength, they all bow down themselves before the throne. And they worship him. That's key. In verses 8 through 11, especially when we get to verses 9 through 11, you can see these songs that are being said.

At day and night, in verse 8, they never stop saying, holy, holy, holy is the Lord. And then they worship him in verse 11. So a key theme in these two chapters is worship.

In the Roman world, where these first Christians were, where John was, and where these churches were, Jesus is writing to, people worshipped many gods, a whole catalogue of gods.

And alongside them, they worshipped the emperor. They would say, Caesar is worthy. Caesar is Lord. And the word worthy and the word worship are connected.

[14 : 47] When you worship something, you're saying that they are worth your praise. They are worth you giving them all you've got. There's that kind of idea of worthiness in worship.

Ascribing worth to them. And when we worship, we ascribe to someone or something, reverence, trust, love, service. We worship when we take something or someone beyond ourselves and we depend on them to find meaning, significance, fulfillment.

So in our culture today, instead of worshipping big far away gods like they did in the Roman world, we tend to worship small, nearby things. We worship things in our material world.

We worship money and we worship sex and we worship success. And we worship comfort. And when we turn created things like that into gods and we worship them, it kind of reduces us.

It diminishes us because we were made to worship something eternal and transcendent. And you get shaped by what you worship. So what John sees here is that whatever the people around us are worshipping today, heaven is a place where the God of the Bible is being worshipped.

[16 : 07] He's on a throne and he's being worshipped. And when we see that, when we can keep our eyes fixed through that door in heaven, it empowers us to live really valuable Christian lives today.

Faithful lives. Lives that really count in the world today. Lives that make a difference. As we just think about the decisions we make that other people find mad, baffling, because they don't fit with what they are living for and what they think that you need in life.

When we give to God our holidays, many of you will work in environments, offices, where people find it baffling if you get back from summer and they find that you took a week and a half of your annual leave to go and help on a Christian youth camp.

But it makes sense to do that if your eyes are fixed on the throne and God in heaven. Or we think about our bodies. Just teeing up later Roots Plus tonight, I remember a non-Christian friend saying to me in the pub, he said, I think that the Christian view of sex and marriage and all that like not living together till you're married is the worst possible preparation you could have for trying to find the ideal partner for life.

And a Christian friend of mine replied and said, well I think it comes back to the fundamentals of what you believe about God.

[17 : 38] I believe that God made me and I believe that he's good. So I believe that it's worth doing things his way with my body and with my life.

See he was trying to describe it as an act of worship that God is worthy of our trust. That's living out Revelation 4.11 here on earth worshipping God with our lives.

We need to see what John saw that in heaven whatever people are worshipping around here however scary it might be when people look at us differently for not worshipping what they worship we know there is a higher throne where God is the one who is worthy.

So John has set the scene and now we get to the extraordinary drama in chapter 5 and John sees three things in chapter 5 they're on the sheets the first is a scroll and a crisis in heaven.

So look with me at 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.

[18 : 47] So this scroll is in God's right hand and it's all rolled up and I think the best way to imagine this scroll rolled up is that if there was a seal and when you break the seal and unroll it there's then another seal and then another seal and that's how the chapters of Revelation will unfold as these seals are broken one by one but at the moment the scroll is being held in God's right hand and it's all sealed up.

It's got writing on both sides which my guess is that the writing is on both sides because God is into the details he's got everything planned out in his plans for the future and in verse 2 we hear the most important question in the universe it's asked by a mighty angel have a look with me at verse 2 who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll and this is massive right because it's not just I don't think about breaking the seal so we will hear what's going to happen the way that God makes things happen in creation is by his word his powerful word and his words are on the scroll so long as that scroll remains sealed God's purposes for creation cannot take place so who is worthy silence in heaven have a look have a look at verse 3 but no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it so John's reaction is appropriate verse 4

I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside and really this is how we should all feel if we could know the truth deeply enough if God's will cannot be done in our world it is cause for devastation we pray in the prayer Jesus told us thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven just think about how much we need God's plan to happen for our world we were just praying weren't we as Derek led us in our prayers tonight for justice there is so much injustice in our world I was chatting to the Ukrainians this morning news coming out of Ukraine yesterday devastating loss of men in Ukraine just in in our relationships people around us there is so much grief there is sadness and there is death and people are missed and there is regret in people's lives and there is instability and there is loneliness and there is brokenness and here is John seeing that in heaven

God has a plan for the world to put things right and no one can open the scroll and he sheds tears of despair for the world so the second thing John sees is the solution John sees one who is worthy in heaven and it's as though suddenly everything slows down first there is breaking news in verse 5 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 now these are titles for the Messiah rich in the Old Testament promises the prophecies that he fulfilled so God promised through Jacob one of the patriarchs so we describe him as the first people who got the promises of God Jacob Jacob was given this promise for one of his sons Judah in Genesis chapter 49 that there would be a lion of Judah a forever king appointed by God descended from

Jacob's son Judah and then through Isaiah hundreds of years later God makes further promises about this lion of Judah and he says he will be the root of David so David was a king in Judah's line and the root of David will come filled with the spirit of God and one day he will reign over the world in God's righteousness and he will bring an era of harmony and peace that will last forever and he will gather God's people in to the world put right and the elder here is saying to John there is one whom the whole of heaven and earth can pin their hopes on because he's triumphed it's just an extraordinary picture of heaven isn't it that you know when I think of heaven if I was describing heaven to someone I guess I would describe it in language of perfection paradise happiness surely and here John sees that without the work of Jesus there is weeping in heaven grief in heaven but wonderfully he hears the breaking news the lion of Judah has triumphed triumphed but then we have an astonishing sight so look with me at verse 6 we pick things up then I saw a lamb looking as if it had been slain standing at the centre of the throne encircled by the four living creatures and the elders so John is weeping and he hears of a lion and he turns and looks and he sees a lamb literally a slain lamb standing in the centre of the throne all through revelation the language is visionary we call it apocalyptic writing apocalyptic is just about revealing uncovering and it's this highly symbolic way of writing which I take it that it's good for us because we are visual people we kind of are drawn in and given deep impressions from symbols and visions but also because John is describing the indescribable and as you're reading Revelation to ask the question you know how much when does the literal stop and the kind of visionary start

[24 : 56] I just don't know how to answer that question I was just meant to sit back and take in these visions and accept that they are true in the way that pictures are true a bit like someone might describe a great boxer and say you know they had the feet of a ballet dancer and the heart of a raging bull and their fists were sledgehammers and all those things would be kind of true of a boxer but like none of them are actually really true but they are true and John hears here of this victorious lion and he sees a slain lamb and the Old Testament scriptures tell us what that means that when God set his people free from slavery in Egypt he did that ultimately by sending his judgment over the Egyptian king who wouldn't listen to him and as he sent the judgment any family living who followed God living in Egypt could instead of undergoing the judgment of God they could sacrifice a lamb and if they killed a lamb the lamb was a substitutionary sacrifice for that home and God's judgment passed over that home and all of that is left as like a shadow year after year the Israelites are remembering the Passover lamb as they eat lamb together at the

Passover festival until John the Baptist is baptizing Jesus in John chapter 1 and it's revealed to him by the spirit and he says of Jesus look the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world he is the substitutionary sacrifice so picture Jesus God's promised forever king standing at the center of that throne in heaven and he's bearing the marks of Calvary because he has come not to bring judgment first time but to bear judgment for his people when he endured the cross I take it that that's somehow how the tension of chapter 4 can be kind of unraveled that you've got this God of holy justice on the throne in 4.8 where they say day and night they never stop saying holy holy holy is the Lord good almighty he's a God of blazing purity but around the throne is this rainbow this picture of God's mercy and his faithfulness that he will have a people who will live with him forever how can that be resolved well only if the victorious lion is a slain lamb standing and how subversive it is to be a Christian of all the greatest human empires and human achievements the only one who triumphs in heaven and is worthy the lion of Judah won his victory when he was led silently like a lamb to the slaughter and was willing to endure the worst humiliation

Rome could inflict on someone and now he's exalted at the center of the throne in heaven he is enduringly strong in verse six it says the lamb had seven horns these pictures of strength and royalty he's all seeing and all knowing he has seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God so the spirit of God that was before the throne in chapter four is kind of proceeding out from this slain lamb standing and in verse seven this magnificent one who suffered for us he moves forward towards the scroll in God's right hand and our hearts leap with John's as we see that he has the authority and the audacity to take this scroll from the right hand of God verse seven he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne he can open it and all God's plans can be fulfilled what do you do at such a glorious moment well the answer heaven gives us is that you sing so we get a new song the elders fall down before him in verse eight each one had a harp they're holding golden bowls full of incense and we're told those are the prayers of

God's people you see that's the idea is that our prayers that we pray day after day for justice and for Jesus to come and for God's kingdom to be established in the world those prayers are waiting and then now the lamb has finished his work and the lion has triumphed those prayers can be heard in heaven because the lamb is worthy so the elders sing of why he's worthy in verse nine they sing a new song we're told and whenever we hear a new song in the Bible it's because there's been a new act of deliverance by God and here is the act you slain and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation so at great cost to himself people from every ethnic group in the world have been purchased for God and they've been given this new identity verse 10 you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our

God and they will reign on the earth so Jesus is worthy because at great cost he's purchased people he faced the horror of the cross to set us free free from the penalty of sin because he took it free from the power of sin and one day we'll be free from the presence of sin for whom was his death effective we've heard haven't we people from every tribe and language and people and nation saved with a purpose to be his kingdom and priest redeemed to serve God around the world so that the world is filled with the knowledge of his glory so when we look at the nations where Islam is really strong or just secularism is really strong and the church is so small that the people there count as an unreached people we might ask why doesn't God do something about those people so that they can be saved and the answer in this song is that

[31 : 21] Jesus has died to purchase those people he's died to purchase people from every nation not every person but people from every tribe and language and nation and part of his answer of what's God going to do about those people is that he saved you and me obedient lives serving God they will hear of Jesus saving work at the cross there's a guy in our church who has come from a closed country to the gospel a country where if you're found out to be a Christian you could be imprisoned by the authorities or you could be worse could happen to you from vigilantes if you're found to be telling a Muslim about Jesus you could be killed and a church meeting a meeting of secret believers where they opened the Bible and what he cannot get over is the courage of his friend that he would take that risk to invite him to go and open the

Bible with other believers what would give someone that courage well maybe this guy gets that in heaven there is a higher throne and the slain lamb is standing there who by his blood has purchased people from that nation and so whatever the authorities in his country will do to him he's entrusting himself to the one who reigns on that throne so how does heaven respond we've heard about the seals and then about the solution third point tonight thirdly the songs the exhilarated response in heaven so the praise and worship spills over in verse 11 then I looked and I heard the voice of many angels numbering thousands upon thousand and ten thousand times ten thousand I mean just think of the bigness of that throne room that is a hundred million angels isn't it encircling the throne declaring with one deafening voice worthy is the lamb it's complete worship so we get the number seven again they ascribe seven things to the lamb power wealth wisdom strength honor glory and praise it's not that the lamb doesn't already have those things it's them saying we will give him all those things that we have they're giving him everything they've got that's what worship is and then in verse 13 he dials up the volume again there's this cacophony of praise as every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them that is everything worshipping who are they worshipping well in verse 13 it's two distinct persons him who sits on the throne and the lamb creator god in heaven and the lamb at the center of the throne exactly the same worship that's being offered to the lord god in chapter four is now being offered both to god and to

Jesus worthy of our worship and their words are in verse 13 to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever and the four living creatures said amen and the elders fell down and worshipped so folks this is the present reality of heaven tonight unveiled for us and it shows us what our lives are to be all about if we want to live our lives in line with reality with the truth at the heart of our universe we are worshipping people we can't help that we will all worship and all other worship diminishes us but if we've come to Jesus he has set us free to devote ourselves all that we have all that we are our working lives our social lives to living for the ones on the throne the eternal creator god and the lion who is a lamb let's pray together we praise you our lord and god because you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being we praise you lord jesus christ the lion of judah the root of jesse for you are worthy to open the scroll and the will of your father can be done and will be done his kingdom will come our prayers will be answered thanks to your victory we praise you that you are the lamb slain for us now standing and we worship you with gladness in our hearts because you are worthy because you purchased us to be a kingdom and priests by your spirit would you turn our gaze from the small things that we turn into objects of worship and towards you enlarge our hearts we pray open our eyes to a deeper sense of this heavenly reality that our lives may be now as they will be forever complete in worship in wonder love and praise and we ask this for our good for the world's good and for your glory

Amen now