

## **It Is More Rewarding to Be Saved Than You May Have Been Told Revelation 3:21-5:14**

In Revelation 2-3, John (and God, through John) is, frankly, rough on the seven churches of ancient Turkey. They are under virulent persecution, fighting for their survival, even their lives. In their moment of crisis, John – at God’s behest – basically tells them to suck it up and gut it out. He offers no quarter to his fellow-believers: either they stand firm under the wrath of the Roman emperor, or they suffer the wrath of the heavenly emperor. This seeming harshness is partly alleviated by the fact that John is practicing what he preaches: he writes this letter – rather than preaching in person – because he is languishing under barbaric conditions in an ancient prison. Still, is this all we have to look forward to: suffering in this life in order to avoid suffering in the next?

No, indeed, says John. After all the suffering, something unexpectedly glorious is coming. So unexpected and glorious that modern authors and lyricists cannot wrap their minds around it. Along the way, he makes a number of subsidiary points. This week we work through Revelation 4 and 5, eventually reaching John’s main point, though also noting his secondary points as we go.

### **Day 1: Revelation 4:1-8 What must take place? Or what always is!**

This section begins on a surprising note. In 1:1, John says that his purpose is to show God’s people what must soon take place. But he does not do so, not at first. Instead, he describes an initial vision (1:9-20), and then delivers letters to seven different churches (2:1-3:22). Now a heavenly voice promises to show John what will take place ‘after this’, but we again wait for any reference to future events.

Instead, John finds himself in the heavenly palace, with God seated on his throne. His entourage includes twenty-four elders (the number likely referring to the twelve Old Testament patriarchs and the twelve New Testament apostles, representing the entire people of God from both Old and New Testaments). The scene is spectacular, and John struggles to do it justice. He invokes the most valuable precious stones of his era in an effort to capture the splendor of the heavenly throne room: jasper and carnelian, emerald and gold (as well as lightning and thunder). Four animal-like angelic creatures surround the throne, constantly calling out: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” (4:8).

Here, before describing future events, John reorients the perspective of his readers. The primary reality in this universe is not some pretentious

human emperor squatting on some grandiose throne in distant Rome. The primary reality in the universe is the one who pre-existed all things, the one who still is, and the one who will outlast all things. He is the Lord God Almighty. No other power comes even close to him. In the midst of their crisis, it is not the Roman emperor who rules, but God who reigns.

This is where they must begin: not with the fearsomeness of the emperor, or the fearfulness of their predicament, but with the awesomeness of God. And this is where we must begin in times of crisis: not with the fearsomeness of our obstacles or the fearfulness of our predicament, but with the awesomeness of our God.

### **Day 2: Revelation 4:9-11 Worthy is the true emperor**

The Roman emperor has his lackeys whose job is to sing his praise, for however long he may rule. God has angels who sing his praise, and he lives forever. "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power" entails a corollary: only you are worthy, not any earthly emperor. This is why the seven churches are forbidden to worship the emperor: there is only one true emperor worthy of worship, in heaven and on earth.

The basis for worshiping God is explicit here, as elsewhere in Scripture: he is eternal (who was, and is, and who is to come). Beyond that he is the creator of all that is. His authority to rule is anchored in his power to create. All that he has created is responsible to worship him, and is accountable to him. No earthly emperor can claim any of this. They are false claimants both to praise and to throne. He alone rules; he alone is to be praised.

For the seven churches coming under pressure to worship the emperor, this is the one emperor rightly worshipped. And for us, under no pressure to worship emperor, but nonetheless routinely distracted from our worship of God by trinkets and priorities that are pedestrian and not imperial, God reminds us that only he is eternal, and he is our creator: two reasons why we rightly prioritize him alone.

### **Day 3: Revelation 5:1-7 The Lion that conquered, the Lamb that was slain.**

An angel then calls John's attention to another figure in heaven, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah ... [who] triumphed" (5:5). John looks up and sees not a lion, but a lamb; not one who triumphed, but one who was slain, now exalted (5:6).

Here is another reorientation of perspective. John's readers fear the emperor, because he has power to put them to death. The same Roman powers put Jesus to death. But in so doing, they did not triumph over him.

By his loyal obedience to God, Jesus triumphed over his opponents.

So shall his followers triumph over their persecutors, if they remain faithful to God through death. So shall we triumph over any challenge or obstacle that threatens us, if we remain faithful to God, even if we die.

#### **Day 4: Revelation 5:7-10 Worthy is the Lamb**

The Father is worthy of worship as the true emperor, the eternal creator. Now we learn that the Son is worthy of worship as the one who died, and purchased (redeemed) people for God, from every tribe and language and people and nation. Not only has he redeemed them, he has also elevated his people to both royal and religious status.

This speaks volumes to John's original audience. Under their own threat of death for the name of Jesus, they rightly worship him who himself died on their behalf. Despised by Roman elite, and threatened with prison, in Christ they are both royal and religious elite. They must wait for the overthrow of this temporary world, and the revelation of eternal reality. But they will one day rule over their oppressors.

This exhortation and its promise apply no less to us, to the extent that we suffer in this life for the work of God and the cause of Christ. We can expect to suffer, and have little grounds for complaint: after all, we worship Christ who suffered for us; it is no great sacrifice if we suffer for him. And we have benefitted enormously from his suffering: through it, we have both salvation and status.

#### **Day 5: Revelation 5:6-12 Worthier is the Lamb!**

So far, we have noted a parallel: the Father is worshipped in heaven, and so is the Son. At the same time, we have passed over a striking discontinuity. Two, actually.

Who is doing the worshipping in heaven? Two groups worship the Father: four archangels and twenty-four elders (4:8-10). The same two groups worship the Lamb (5:8). But more: also worshipping the Lamb are a throng of angels, thousands upon thousands, and ten thousands upon ten thousands (5:11). This could be thought an incidental detail except for the other discontinuity: in worshipping God, they ascribe him three accolades, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive *glory and honor and power*" (4:11). In worshipping Jesus, they ascribe him *seven* accolades: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive *power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise*" (5:12).

It is hard to find a stronger affirmation of the deity and exalted status of Christ than this: more angelic beings offer him more glowing attributes

than they offer even to the Father. Does this imply that Jesus is greater than the Father? Of course not. It simply serves to underscore the full equality of the Son with the Father.

How does this apply to us? Perhaps everything does not need to be about us. Perhaps it is sufficient application to worship Jesus, who is equal to the Father, and worthy of worship. But if all that does not suffice, rest assured, John does offer a practical application of this grand worship of Christ. And we find it in Revelation 3:21.

### **Day 6: Revelation 3:21 The reward for those who conquer**

As I noted at the beginning of this devotional, after all the suffering, something unexpectedly glorious is coming. So unexpected and so glorious that modern authors and lyricists cannot wrap their minds around it.

The entire heavenly scene of the Father on his throne, followed by the Son on his throne, serves primarily to support an earlier promise that Jesus made to the suffering churches of ancient Turkey. "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" (3:21). This verse has three movements: (a) the Father is on his throne, (b) the Son overcomes and sits down with the Father on his throne, (c) if we overcome, we will sit down with the Son on his throne. Revelation 4 follows with an account of the Father on the throne, then Revelation 5 with the Son on the Father's throne, all to support the promise that if we conquer, we will join the Son on his throne.

This is where the popular imagery of heaven goes wrong. In our songs and books, the image of heaven is us standing around the throne of God, joining the angels as they sing his praises. Revelation paints a grander picture: we are not standing around the throne with the angels, we are seated on the throne, above their status. As reward for our perseverance through obstacles and adversity – provided we do persevere – we share the throne of Christ in heaven.

This is John's ultimate promise and motivation to his readers, including us. John's readers need fear no one, nor do we. John's readers are inferior to no one, nor are we. No power on earth – not even an emperor – can hold a candle to God now. No power on earth – not even an emperor – can hold a candle to what we will become later. Come what may in this life, we can persevere, because of what will come in the next.