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Revelation #13
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Sermon Summary #13

Enthroned! Encircled! Extolled! Revelation 4:1-11

What is happening in heaven right now? And by “right now” I mean right now! Literally. John was given a vision that answers this question and the portrait it provides is undoubtedly as true today as it was nearly 2,000 years ago.

This passage, together with Revelation 5, is a vision of the majesty of a sovereign God in complete control of his creation. From an earthly perspective, it might seem that the enemies of the kingdom of God are winning. Christians are being persecuted, imprisoned, and martyred. Tragedy and trial and turmoil are rampant and the Great Dragon (Satan), the Beast, and the False Prophet appear to have the upper hand. All hope of light at the end of the tunnel grows dim because the tunnel has no end. The tunnel is all there is. History simply has no purpose. Dreams of finally emerging out the other side are shattered . . . there is no other side!

But John's vision reveals that *appearances can be deceiving!* The course of history isn't determined by political intrigue or military might, but by God. What John discovered is that there are two worlds or two dimensions of reality. One is earthly and visible, the other is heavenly and invisible. And remarkably, it is the latter which controls and determines the former. Or better still, it is God who is sovereign over both!

It's as if the Holy Spirit says to John (and to us): “Listen to me. Things are not as they appear. I'm about to show you things as they really are. I'm about to take you into the throne room of God himself. Things aren't running amok. The devil hasn't won. Evil hasn't triumphed. Neither fate nor cruel chance governs the universe. He who was and is and is to come has everything well in hand.” Here in Revelation 4-5 we are given a *biblical worldview*: not a Hollywood worldview, or a worldview shaped by the materialistic values of Wall Street, or worldview shaped by the power brokers in Washington, D.C. This is the worldview of the bible, a worldview that comes from seeing God as he truly is.

The voice is that of Jesus Christ (cf. 1:10-11). As John looks, he sees a vision of the Triune God, enthroned, encircled, and extolled. In Exodus 33:18 Moses made a simple request of God: “Please show me your glory.” God placed him in the “cleft of a rock” and caused his glory to pass by. Here in Revelation 4-5 we are granted access to the sight of God's glory that Moses only saw in passing, in part.

The first two words in Revelation 4:1, “After this,” do not mean that the events of chapters 4-5 occur after the events of chapters 1-3, as if this were a description of their chronological sequence. Rather, these words only indicate that the *vision* of Revelation 4-5 comes to John after the *vision* of Revelation 1-3. In other words, “this is the order in which John saw the visions but not necessarily the historical order of their occurrence as events” (Beale, 316-17). See also 7:1,9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1.

Enthroned!

The voice John hears is that of Jesus Christ (cf. 1:10-11). As John looks, he's confronted with a breathtaking, knee-knocking, heart-pounding, eye-popping vision of the Triune God. *He sees the Lord enthroned, encircled, and extolled.* What follows in chapters four and five of the Apocalypse stretches the imagination and tests our capacity to grasp the beauty of God. Resist the temptation to read these verses as you would a newspaper or novel or even the book of Romans. In fact, it is precisely here that we are confronted with the limitations of human language. Nothing in our vocabulary is fully adequate to explain, account for, or illustrate the ineffable majesty of God.

In Revelation 4:3 we see God in a resplendent blaze of unapproachable light, the jewels refracting the glory and majesty of his luminous beauty. Here is where all worship begins: in the throne room of heaven where God reigns supreme! When we see God as he is, incomparably sublime and incontestably sovereign, we will praise him as we

should in unison with the heavenly hosts. This is not a pathetic deity wringing his hands over a world catapulting into oblivion. He does not pace the floor of heaven with furrowed brow, riddled with anxiety over the outcome of human history. God reigns!

If asked to describe God, what terms would you employ? I fear that many Christians are so deficient in their knowledge and experience of God that they'd portray him as a formless, passionless, grey blob of abstract power. John's vision, on the other hand, is *a virtual kaleidoscope of color and sound and sight and smell!* John sees all the colors of the rainbow magnified!

The one on the throne has the appearance of *jasper*, an opaque stone that tends to be red but is also found in yellow, green, and grayish blue. It suggests the qualities of majesty and holiness and is used later in Revelation as an image for the overall appearance of the New Jerusalem, which manifests the glory of God (21:11), and is the material from which its walls are constructed (21:18), as well as the first of its twelve foundations (21:19).

The *sardius* (or *carnelian*) was a red stone, similar in appearance to a ruby. It evokes the image of both divine jealousy and righteous wrath, both the burning zeal of God for the fame of his name and his just and resolute response to those who would bring reproach upon it.

The *rainbow* reminds us of the faithfulness of God when he first set this sign in the heavens as a pledge to Noah following the great flood. Also found in Ezekiel 1:28, the rainbow reminds us that God's wrath and judgment, perhaps symbolized by the sardius as well as described in the subsequent visions, are tempered by his mercy and his promise to Noah never again to totally destroy the earth. In Ezekiel the rainbow is explicitly said to portray the radiant appearance of God's glory. Here it emanates like an *emerald*, reminding us that our God is filled not only with jealous zeal but tender hearted affection.

Of course, John is not saying that God *is* a jasper or a sardius, but that his appearance was *like* such precious stones. *This is not photographic reproduction but symbolic imagery.* He wants to stir our imaginations and inflame our hearts, not fill our minds with endless facts.

The atmosphere of this scene is bathed in mystery and awash in wonder. *Worship without wonder is lifeless and boring.* Many have lost their sense of awe and amazement when it comes to God. Having begun with the arrogant presumption of knowing about God all that one can, they reduce him to manageable terms and confine him to a tidy theological box, the dimensions of which conform to their predilections of what a god ought to be and do. That they've lost the capacity to *marvel* at the *majesty* of God comes as little surprise. Warren Wiersbe explains:

“We must recognize the fact that true wonder is not a passing emotion or some kind of shallow excitement. It has depth to it. True wonder reaches right into your heart and mind and shakes you up. It not only has depth, it has value; it enriches your life. Wonder is not cheap amusement that brings a smile to your face. It is an encounter with reality – with God – that brings awe to your heart. You are overwhelmed with an emotion that is a mixture of gratitude, adoration, reverence, fear, -- and love. You are not looking for explanations; you are lost in the wonder of God” (*Real Worship*, 44-45).

Our wonder in God's presence, however, is not borne of ignorance but of knowledge. We know something about the majesty of God and for that reason are lost in wonder, love and praise. We can't stand in awe of someone of whom we're ignorant. Our wonder deepens with each degree of understanding.

But is it *practical* to worship when the world is falling apart? John's life is at risk. Of all the apostles, he alone has survived. Who knows how much longer he has? In such a crisis, why would the Spirit escort John into heaven and point to the adoring and passionate praise of angels and odd creatures and saints? Because it's the only thing that makes sense! Worship is no flight from reality. Nothing is more real than what John sees and hears and senses around the throne of God.

Some will read Revelation 4-5 and say: “Ah, this is all well and good. But of what practical benefit is it to me at work? How does this help me respond to an abusive and overbearing boss? How does it help me fight the temptation to lust after one of my co-workers? How does it help me love my spouse and my kids? How does it strengthen me to endure times of financial strain and physical pain?”

This vision of God enthroned, encircled and extolled is eminently practical because adoring and affectionate praise is what restores our sense of ultimate value. It exposes the worthless and temporary and tawdry stuff of this world. Worship energizes the heart to seek satisfaction in Jesus alone. In worship we are reminded that this world is fleeting and unworthy of our heart's devotion. Worship connects our souls with the transcendent power of God and awakens in us appreciation for true beauty. It pulls back the veil of deception and exposes the ugliness of sin and Satan. Worship is a joyful rebuke of the world. When our hearts are riveted on Jesus everything else in life becomes so utterly unnecessary and we become far less demanding.

Encircled!

In John's vision the throne of God is, as it should be, at the *center* of all heavenly activity. The throne is the focus of **a series of concentric circles** made up first of a rainbow, then a circle of the four living creatures, then a circle of the twenty-four thrones upon which the twenty-four elders sit. According to Revelation 5:11 (and again in 7:11), a great host of angels also encircled the throne. Eventually all creation joins the worshipping throng (see Rev. 5:13).

We read in v. 3 that "around the throne" was a "rainbow" and now in v. 4 "around the throne" were twenty-four thrones on which sat twenty-four Elders. They wear white garments and golden crowns (4:4), prostrate themselves before God in worship (4:10; 5:14; 11:16; 19:4), and cast before him their golden crowns (4:10). They sing hymns of praise to God (4:11; 5:9-10; 11:17-18), holding harps and bowls full of incense that are said to represent the prayers of Christians (5:8).

Who are they? What are they? Some see in them **an exalted angelic order**, like the cherubim and seraphim. There are several things that point to them being a species of angels. Later in Revelation 5:8 they are described as bringing the prayers of the saints to God. In Revelation 5:5 and 7:13 they interpret for John the meaning of his visions, a typical angelic function in Scripture. And in 4:9-10; 5:8, 14; 7:11; and 19:4 they join with the four living creatures and the rest of the angels in worshipping God.

On the other hand, nowhere else in Scripture are angels called "Elders." And in Revelation it is the people of God who wear crowns and are clothed in white and sit on thrones (2:10; 3:4-5; 3:21; 20:4; 7:13-15; 19:7-8, 14). But this may be due to the fact that **these are angels who symbolize or represent the saints**.

Others think they are **exalted OT believers**. King David organized the temple servants into twenty-four orders of priests (1 Chron. 24:3-19), twenty-four Levitical gatekeepers (26:17-19), and twenty-four orders of Levites commissioned to prophesy, give thanks, praise God, and sing to the accompaniment of harps and lyres and cymbals (25:6-31).

Another possibility is that they are **exalted NT saints**, in particular, individual Christians who have sealed their faith through martyrdom and are now glorified and participating in an exalted heavenly life. Thrones are sometimes used as a metaphor for the heavenly reward of the righteous. But if they are only NT saints, why the number 24? Could this be a symbol for their continuous, twenty-four-hour worship, day and night?

I find it difficult not to see in the number "24" a reference to **the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the NT church** (they are associated again in 21:12-14). If so, the Elders may be **representatives of the entire community of the redeemed from both testaments**. But are they **human** or **angelic** representatives? Probably the latter insofar as they bring the prayers of the saints before God (5:8) and sing of the redeemed in the third person (5:9-10). Also, the fact that these 24 elders are distinguished from the redeemed multitude in Revelation 7:9-17 indicates they are **angelic representatives of all the people of God**.

Rest assured of one thing. If they are in fact angels I doubt they look anything like the fat little cherubs with dimpled cheeks that hang playfully suspended above a baby's crib. These are powerful and majestic creatures whose radiance reflects the glory of the one they so adoringly worship and serve.

What's important, however, isn't who they are but **what they do**. They are mesmerized by the majesty of God, obsessed with his glory, and committed to unending and adoring praise.

The lightning and thunder, undoubtedly quite literal, are also symbolic of God's awesome power and infinite might and remind us of the revelation of God at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19:16–18; 20:18–20). They may well be emanations of the endless energy of God's own being, pointing to the limitless depths of divine power. The number “seven” in Revelation often symbolizes divine perfection and completeness. Thus the *seven spirits* are *the one Holy Spirit represented under the symbolism of a seven-fold or complete manifestation of his being*.

The four living creatures remind us of the seraphim of Isaiah 6 and the cherubim of Ezekiel 1:5-25 and 10:1-22. Could they be symbolic of the created world itself, all of which is responsible to render praise to God? This is suggested by *the number “four” which points to the totality of the natural order*: the four points of the compass, the four corners of the earth, and the four winds of heaven. Are they angels, or perhaps another “species” of created, supernatural beings?

They are standing upon something that looks like *a sea of glass resembling crystal* (v. 6). Its surface stretches out before the throne to reflect the flashing light that proceeds from the character of God. They appear to stand in front, behind, and on either side of the throne (they are “in the midst” of and “around” the throne in 4:6, and “before” the throne in 5:8; 19:4). Some suggest they are supporting the throne itself. Their focus is entirely on God, not each other or anything or anyone else in heaven.

The description of them in v. 7 may be designed to suggest qualities in the God they serve: the lion pointing to royal power; the calf/ox, a symbol of strength; the man, an expression of intelligence and spirituality; and the eagle, an embodiment of swiftness of action.

Extolled!

Their worship (v. 8) is *unending*: “Day and night they never cease to say” (cf. Rev. 14:11). As there is constant and perpetual punishment in hell, so there is constant and perpetual praise in heaven. I know that some of you struggle to remain focused and engaged during the 30 minutes of praise that happens each Sunday here at Bridgeway. 30 minutes? Really? Are you actually prepared to tell me that this God who is portrayed for us in Revelation 4-5 isn't worth at least 30 minutes of your undivided attention and adoration? 30 minutes in a week? Too long? Too much? Really? Have you actually read these two chapters? Are you sincerely prepared to tell me that 30 minutes is excessive when it comes to this God? Really?

The focus is on three of God's attributes: his holiness, his sovereignty, and his eternity.

First, is his *holiness*, an echo of Isaiah 6. When Isaiah saw God for who he is, he saw himself as well. Knowledge of God always awakens a knowledge of oneself. God's holiness always exposes our sinfulness. But the holy God is also the gracious redeemer, for the hot coal applied to Isaiah's lips speaks of forgiveness and cleansing.

The God who captivates them is also *sovereign*. He is “the Almighty” for he sits on the divine “throne” (mentioned 14x in this chapter, a symbol of divine authority and dominion and power).

He is also the *eternal* God “who was and is and is to come” (cf. Ex. 3:14). Although timeless in his essential being, it must be noted that the phrase “who is to come” points more to the impending return of God in the person of Jesus to consummate his kingdom than to the idea of eternal existence.

The praise that comes from the four living creatures gives way to that of the twenty-four elders (vv. 9-11). The word “worship” means to fall prostrate at someone's feet. What gloriously appropriate repetition: *they fall down before him to fall down before him!* This is the first occurrence in Revelation of the paired verbs “to fall down” and “to worship” which are used to describe two stages of a single act of adoration and thus appear to be synonymous (they are also paired in 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:10; 22:8; this combination is also found in Matt 2:11; 4:9; 18:26; Acts 10:25; 1 Cor 14:25).

Why did the Elders fall face down? Over and over again, they hit the dirt, prostrate in God's presence (4:10; 5:8,14). Did one of the four living creatures shove them? Was it simply mechanical obedience to some heavenly liturgy? What did they see or hear or feel or believe or think that could have induced such an extravagant response? What possessed them to fall over and over and over again?

No sooner do they stand than they fall! It isn't that they fall, come to their senses, and then stand, dusting themselves off, a little embarrassed for having momentarily lost their composure. No! They stand, then come to their senses, and fall! ***The only reasonable, rational, sensible thing to do is to fall down!*** They can't bear the thought of standing in the presence of such beauty and glory. Nothing would be more inappropriate or out of order than to remain upright and erect. ***They don't fall because they are wounded or weak or intimidated or fearful. They fall because they are overwhelmed!***

Why do the four living creatures not cease day or night from praising? Is it an expression of mere "duty"? Is their adoration coerced or perhaps the fruit of bribery? Undoubtedly not! Consider every alternative. What else could possibly compare with the joy of unending adoration and delight in the splendor of God? No one put a gun to their head or threatened them with hell should they decline to worship. Why should they cease? For whom should they give up their praise? To do what? To go where? What can compare, what can rival, what can compete in its capacity to fascinate and fulfill and satisfy and entrance? Is there another being more splendid? Is there another 'god' more beautiful?

True worship, such as we see in Revelation 4-5, is not simply unending, it is ***uninhibited***. The atmosphere around the throne is charged with an ***unashamed exuberance***. Physical expressions of delight and fear and joy and awe are a commonplace. Unlike heaven, unfortunately, worship wars continue to rage in churches on every continent on earth. Whereas some enjoy the atmosphere of a religious carnival, Sunday morning in other churches bears a striking resemblance to the county morgue! Your choice these days is often between the frenzy of unbridled chaos or the rigidity of immovable concrete.

Our personal preferences notwithstanding, in heaven affections are ablaze for God. Bodies are prostrate in his presence. Praise is passionate. Enjoyment is extravagant. There is little, if any, fear of feelings.

I'm surprised by how unsettling this is to some people. Could it possibly be due to their lack of familiarity with the central figures in Scripture? Consider, for example, ***David***, King of Israel. Do you know why people love the psalms and seem always to return to them in time of need? Look no farther than the passion of their author, a man who virtually breathed holy desperation for God. A man whose heart beat with intense yearning and deep gratitude and a chronic longing for God's presence. A man who panted and thirsted and hungered for God and rejoiced and exulted and reveled in God. A man who was as exuberant in his celebration of righteousness as he was broken when injustice prevailed.

Or consider the apostle ***Paul***. Although you may not think of him as an emotional or passionate person, there is hardly an epistle of his that does not drip with earnest longings of soul and spirit. His heart was ablaze with love for God and his mind flooded with high and exalted thoughts of his Savior. He happily spurned the comforts of this life, counting all things as refuse, esteeming them dung (Phil. 3:8) that he might experience the unparalleled thrill of knowing Jesus. He was constrained by love, often moved to tears of sympathy, and roused to holy anger by those who would bring harm to the church of Jesus Christ.

Paul's letters are filled with references to his overflowing affection for the people of God (2 Cor. 12:19; Phil. 4:1; 2 Tim. 1:2; and especially 1 Thess. 2:7-8). He speaks of his "bowels of love" (Phil. 1:8; Philemon 12,20) for them, of his pity and mercy (Phil. 2:1), of his anguish of heart and the tears he shed for their welfare (2 Cor. 2:4), of his continual grief for the lost (Rom. 9:2), and of his enlarged heart (2 Cor. 6:11).

Surely ***Jesus*** himself was a passionate man greatly moved in heart and spirit with holy affection. He was not ashamed or hesitant to pray with "loud crying and tears" (Heb. 5:7). The gospel writers speak of him as experiencing amazement, sorrow and grief (Mark 3:5), zeal (John 2:17), weeping (Lk. 19:41-42), earnest desire (Lk. 22:15), pity and compassion (Mt. 15:32; 18:34), anger (John 2:13-19), love (John 15:9), and joy (John 15:11). In Luke 10:21 he is said to have "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" as he was praying to the Father. He declared in John 15:11 and 17:13 that one of the principal aims in his earthly mission was to perfect the joy of his followers. Thus our joy is the joy of Jesus in us!

I don't believe it's possible to truly understand and appreciate the great things of God without being stirred with passion and zeal and joy and delight and fervor. Only obdurate spiritual blindness prevents the human soul from being greatly impressed and powerfully moved by the revelation of such eternal splendor.

The inhabitants of heaven feel compelled to cast down their crowns to acknowledge that any personal honor or power or authority is ultimately God's. They proclaim the Creator worthy of glory and honor and power because by his will "they existed and were created" (literally, "they were and they were created"; 4:11).

But why the apparent illogical order of the verbs? How can the "existence" of everything precede creation? In one sense, all things "first" existed in God's mind and then came into being by God's will. Or perhaps the preservation of all things is mentioned before creation to encourage the persecuted people of God with the assurance that whatever befalls them is encompassed within their creator's ultimate purpose.

Conclusion

What is the practical takeaway or the practical payoff of our time in Revelation 4? I'm actually a little surprised that anyone would ask such a question, but let me give you one short answer as it relates to our battle with temptation.

Again, the question is this: What does this vision of God in Revelation 4 have to do with my holiness and my struggle with sin? How does meditating and prayerfully reflecting on this majestic description of God affect my battle with temptation? Why spend so much time and energy on the character and beauty of God?

The answer is easy. It is so that you will walk out of this auditorium and through the course of every day spiritually dazed, with a deeper grasp on the grandeur of God and a heart filled with adoration and awe. I want you to leave here with your mouth wide open in wonder and your eyes bulging from your head in stunned incredulity. And here is why.

Spiritually stunned people are not easily seduced by sin. People in awe of God will always find sin less appealing. When you are dazzled by God it is difficult to be duped by sin. When you are enthralled by his beauty it is hard to become enslaved by unrighteousness. People whose attention has been captured by the beauty of Christ find little appeal in the glamour of this world. People whose hearts are enthralled with the revelation of God's greatness turn a deaf ear to the otherwise alluring sounds of sin, the flesh, and the Devil. Here is how James Hamilton put it:

"What will it take to set you free from the world's idolatries – what will it take to keep you from trusting in things that are no gods at all? What will make you free from the world's immoralities – what will it take to make you untouched by the lust for smut that the world peddles and with which worldlings ruin their lives? What will it take to liberate you from the world's false perspective on the way things are – the perspective that assumes there is no god, there is no revelation of truth in the Bible, and there will be no judgment? I'll tell you what it will take: it will take seeing God as he is. Beholding God will break the chains of idolatry because when you see God, you see what Deity is, and that exposes the idols as worthless and unworthy of [your] trust. Beholding God will purify you from immorality because when you see God you see what beauty and faithfulness are, and that exposes the ugliness of adultery. Beholding God will give you new lenses through which to look at the world because God himself defines reality" (Commentary on Revelation, 130).