

The God of Revelation  
Revelation 1:1-2, 4b-8, 12-13, 17-19; 19:6

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*Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns." Rev. 19:6*

Our study in how the God of yesterday and today is depicted in the Bible brings us now to the Book of Revelation.

The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic book. *Apocalyptic* is a word that sounds strange to us and perhaps more than a bit frightening. We are helped a great deal when we learn what the word *apocalypse* actually means. *Apocalypse* is the Greek word for *revelation*. To reveal something is to show it. The Book of Revelation is an apocalypse because it is concerned with showing something to be true.

The truth shown in Revelation is truth originally for a persecuted people in the early Christian decades. It is couched in a literary style that makes extensive use of symbols and which acts as if it is writing about the future. But the inspired author is more interested in the time right outside his window than he is in some futuristic time. He uses the technique of symbolism and futuristic writing to show persecuted people what God is doing in their circumstances to help them. As such, Revelation is a book of comfort rather than a book of predictions. It is a book of consolation, not prognostication.

Key to understanding the Book of Revelation is seeing where it places the center of theological gravity. Some interpreters skew the book off in the wrong direction because they read it as if it is saying the center of theological gravity in Christianity is in the future, in some decisive event that has yet to take place. A better reading understands that Revelation places the center of theological gravity in the past, in a decisive event that has already taken place and which is now working itself out influentially in the lives of people. This central and decisive event is the death and resurrection of Jesus. We get faith and life right not when we predict cataclysmic of the future but when we stay loyal in our present circumstances to Jesus who died, rose, lives, and reigns now.

The inspired writer of Revelation shows us this truth by way of several images. I'll mention just a small handful.

### *Lampstands*

One of the first images employed in Revelation is the lampstand. The work of a lampstand is to hold a light, lifting it so it can illumine a broader area. The lampstand isn't itself the light but it holds the light.

Revelation depicts the persecuted churches of the early Christian decades as lampstands. They are about the difficult work of holding high the light of truth in a difficult time. The little congregations in town after town are doing their best against terrible odds to represent the faith and extend it. There is opposition. There is rejection. There is persecution. There are money problems. There are loyalty problems. There is conflict within as well as pressure from without. Nothing about the work of the church or the life of the Christian is easy.

What is significant, however, is that there is one who moves among the lampstands. The writer of Revelation has caught a vision that there is one like the Son of Man circulating amid the lampstands. That's Jesus. He is not far removed from those little fellowships struggling to keep the faith in a difficult time. He is sandals on the ground with them. He understands. He knows about every difficulty. He sees every hardship. The church is not alone. Christians are not by themselves against the terrible odds of the time. Christ Jesus is with them.

Can you translate that into our situation? I am sure you can. There is nothing easy about being Christian today. There is nothing to make the work of the church easy. We are like lampstands dutifully doing our best to hold high the light of God but the winds of culture all work to blow us over and the unsteady rumblings of society all work to topple us. But Christ is in our midst right along with us as we face the difficult challenges of being people of faith today.

### *Throne*

I move now from the image of the lampstands to the image of the throne. The image of the throne is one of the most prominent in the Book of Revelation. The word *throne* appears 62 times in the New Testament. Of those, 47 of them are in the Book of Revelation. And 14 of those are in chapter 4.

The fourth chapter of Revelation is one which sets the theme of the book. It is a vision of the throne of God. Hardly a sentence of that important chapter goes by without the word *throne* appearing. Throne. Throne. Throne. Fourteen times over that word appears in chapter four. The inspired writer wants his readers to lift their eyes from all that is difficult around them and be captivated by the throne of God.

Why? Well, you can imagine that a Christian people persecuted by the Roman Empire felt threatened by the emperor's power. They were under the control of the emperor's earthly throne. The empire had military power, economic power, legislative power, power over life and death. The people of that time maybe did not know much about the extent of the world, but they saw that every bit of ground they could see was ruled by Rome. The throne of Rome was made out to be inescapable, undefeatable, unstoppable.

Revelation discloses another throne. It is higher than Rome's. It is better than Rome's. It rules more than Rome's. It is the throne of God, majestic and marvelous. And with that vision of the throne of God comes hope for it means that Rome does not have the last word. God has the last word. Even over Rome. Authority does not rest with human beings and their institutions however strong. God reigns!

You can translate that into our situation, too, I am sure. So much seems to be recklessly in the driver's seat today and we are careening, it can seem, toward destruction. Wrong seems to be in control. Power is in the wrong hands. And the forces at work against us look to be unmatched. Ah, but Christ Jesus is in our midst and God is on the throne of real power. Look up and have hope, you beleaguered people. Look up and have hope.

### *The Lamb*

Chapter one of Revelation brings us the image of the lampstands. Chapter four presents the image of the throne. Chapter five shows the image of the Lamb. The Lamb is Christ Jesus himself. The Lamb in Revelation bears all the marks of a sacrificial animal that has been slain, but yet the Lamb lives. So Christ Jesus died upon the cross but rose from the grave and lives.

The Lamb not only lives he is worthy of highest of high praise. Revelation is a book of music. At first there are just a few singers. But the choir swells from a few to more and then to myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands (Rev. 5:11). The writer hears that the song is sung by "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea: (Rev. 5:13). Every singer – all these myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands – is singing from the same hymnal and the same page in the hymnal. Their song sings of the absolutely wonderful worthiness of Christ.

Why is Christ worthy? Revelation describes it this way. God, who sits upon the throne, has a scroll in his hand. The scroll is God's notebook, as it were. It is filled with writing. (Rev. 5:1) It contains the intent and purpose and plan of God. It is the rationale of the universe. It is the why and the wherefore of all things. It is sealed. It is tightly sealed. There is no one who can open it. No one on earth can peer into it. No one in heaven knows what it contains. But Christ – this Lamb of God – is alone able to open it! Here is why I say the death and resurrection of Christ is the center of gravity in Revelation. Christ who died and rose is the one and only one who can help interpret the truth of time and eternity.

Apply that to today. If you want to know anything about how to live today, how to get through this pandemic, how to navigate this terrible time, how to be the church, how to structure your life – if you want to know anything about the secret of life, then get yourself to Jesus who died and rose and lives. He knows and he will help you as none other can. He alone is awesome; everything else just pretends to be.

### *Victory*

So far we have explored three of the many images in Revelation: the lampstands, the throne, and the Lamb. There are several more to see, but I will show just one more. And that is the theme of victory.

There are a number of battles that take place in this complicated book. They should not be interpreted as ones that are to happen in sequence, first this battle and then the next all the way to the last. They are all the same battle, just described in a different way each time. It is not a battle that is yet to be; it is one that always is. It is always happening. It is the battle of good against evil. Revelation shows that evil, monstrous as it can be, always loses. It may have

temporary victories. Evil may gain the upper hand now and again. But evil is doomed to lose. The overpowering goodness of God will prevail. Always. That is the victory.

God shares the thrill of the victory – the gains of it – with the faithful. Just as there were just a few at first singing out of that hymnal I mentioned moments ago and then more and more, so there are in Revelation a few who know the victory at first but more and more are added. The writer first tells of “twenty-four elders” with crowns and white robes before the throne of God (Rev. 4:4). In chapter seven there are 144,000 (Rev. 7:4). Now there are those who think that number is a cap on the number to be saved, that the number of the redeemed will be a limited number. Everything about 144,000 as a number is a symbol of just the opposite of limitation.

Why? Twelve is, in biblical imagery, the number of completeness. There were 12 disciples because there were 12 tribes of Israel because there were 12 sons of Jacob. When Judas vacated his position, leaving just 11, a twelfth had to be found to complete the group. Anytime you encounter a group of 12 in scripture – as in twelve baskets of leftovers after the feeding of the five thousand – the reference is to completeness, to fullness. Well, now, remember your math homework: 12 times 12 is 144. In the language of biblical imagery, fullness times fullness, or completeness times completeness, is 144. Revelation multiplies that by 1000! What is meant by 144,000? Completeness times completeness one thousand times over! 144,000 is the extravagant grace of God sharing the victory of God’s loving power through Jesus to a grandly inclusive number. Revelation tallies it to be “a great multitude that no one [can] count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” These all stand before the throne of God with the Lamb, robed and redeemed and rejoicing (Rev. 7:9).

Listen to me with care. This is not Christian triumphalism as if to say it is the church that triumphs or Christianity that triumphs. It is a victory broader than the church and bigger than Christianity. It is a victory fully and completely inclusive.

None of this is to say there will not be struggle. We are still lampstands and our work feels insecure against the prevailing winds of society and cultural change and our common problems. But victory is ours because Christ has won the decisive victory already and will give us a share in it.

A sermon like this has two purposes. One is to put this Book of Revelation in your reach so it does not seem quite so distant and foreign. The other – and higher – is to encourage you to put the God of Revelation in your heart and at the heart of all your living. The struggle is great and defeat always seems to be inches away; but God is awesome as nothing else is, and the awesome God is awesomely on your side. Fight on. Fight on with hope. Stay loyal to God who is loyal to you. That is the key to understanding and facing life today.