

# REVELATION

## Study 4: The Throne of God

In our previous study, we looked at the seven oracles given by Jesus to the seven churches in Asia and how his call to conquer was the one big exhortation that transcended all the encouragements and warnings that were given in those seven oracles. But we also mentioned how Jesus' call to conquer raises questions for those who hear it. How exactly are Jesus' people supposed to go about conquering and inheriting the new world that God has promised? And what is the actual connection between loyalty to Jesus and this idea of conquering? Well, we have to keep reading.

In this particular study, we are going to read and discuss John's incredible vision of God's heavenly throne room that is described in the next two chapters of the book (Revelation 4-5). In this vision, we are introduced to two images that are intended to influence how we interpret and understand the rest of the book. They reveal the essential theology and message of the Book of Revelation and provide us with the paradoxical answer as to how we are meant to carry out Jesus' call to conquer.

### **The Creator and King of the Universe**

#### *Revelation 4*

After we hear the seven oracles to the seven churches, we learn that John is given another vision where he is granted access into God's heavenly throne room. This is not a vision of something that will take place in the future, but rather a glimpse behind the curtain of this world to see who really holds all power and authority – to see who is truly "Lord and God".<sup>1</sup>

John's description of God's heavenly throne room contains many similarities to the rituals that were associated with the Roman Emperor's royal court. The emperor's throne was often surrounded with attendants who would sing songs and praise the emperor, and there would be lesser kings around the emperor who would give him golden crowns as a way of acknowledging his universal power.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Remember that Domitian, the Roman Emperor (Caesar), demanded that he be worshipped as 'lord and god'.

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 106

John's vision of God's heavenly throne room communicates a clear message to his readers. John has seen the ultimate royal court and the highest throne in the universe, and the Roman Emperor (nor the President of the United States) is nowhere to be found. The Almighty God of Israel is the one seated on this throne; he alone is the Almighty Creator and true King of the Universe.

The language and imagery that John uses to describe the scene surrounding God's throne is a mix of many different references and descriptions of God's presence found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> And one of those references that stands out in particular is the different images of God's throne room that are taken directly from the scene surrounding Mt. Sinai in the Book of Exodus.

The combination of lightening and thunder and rumblings and fire and the sound of a trumpet remind the readers of God's presence at Mt. Sinai.<sup>4</sup> This would likely have a positive effect on the listeners' perspective of their current situation.

It would remind Christians living under the influence and power of the Roman Empire that they have been in this situation before. This is not the first time that God's people have been an oppressed minority struggling with life in a dominant world empire. It would remind Christians that the one John has seen seated on the highest throne in the universe is the God who has a history of confronting oppressive empires, rescuing and vindicating his oppressed people and leading his people to the new home that he has promised them.

John's vision of the Almighty God seated on his throne encourages the churches in Asia with the hope that the emperor and the empire will not exercise their oppressive power forever. Like he has done throughout history, God will raise up his servant and save his people.

This scene that John describes of God's throne room brings hope and reminds John's listeners that the God of Israel, not the emperor of Rome, is the only one who is worthy to receive our allegiance, honor and praise. He is the one who changes times and seasons, and he is the one who holds the authority to set up kings on earth and the authority to remove them when he is ready.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Most of this imagery is taken from Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, but some of the imagery comes from other books in Scripture.

<sup>4</sup> Read Exodus 19-20

<sup>5</sup> Read Daniel 2

## The Scroll With Seven Seals

*Revelation 5:1-5*

After John's initial observation of the scene surrounding God's throne, he notices a scroll in the right hand of God that has been sealed up with seven wax seals. This scroll symbolizes the plan of God that had been revealed to the Hebrew prophets and perhaps more specifically to the prophet Daniel<sup>6</sup> – God's plan to establish his kingdom and to become King over all the nations on earth.

However, there is a pivotal problem that is proclaimed by an angel in the heavenly throne room. There is no human in all the world who has been found worthy to open this scroll. As N.T. Wright puts it, "God's purposes cannot go forward because there is no human being to act on God's behalf to rescue the human race and to get the project of creation itself back on track."<sup>7</sup>

This leads John to start weeping at the reality of such a hopeless situation for humanity.

But then John hears one of the heavenly beings say to him,

"Weep no more; Look! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Son of David, has conquered; he is the one who can open the scroll."

These are well-known descriptions from the Hebrew Scriptures of the promised Messiah of Israel who would come to defeat evil, rescue God's people and establish God's kingdom through a great act of power, conquest and victory.<sup>8</sup>

So John hears the good news that the conquering Messiah has been found worthy to advance God's plan and purposes forward. As your listening to this declaration about the Lion of Judah conquering, you might begin to wonder if John is about to describe some sort of event where the Messiah is going to come back and wage war on Caesar and the Roman Empire. But then what John turns around and actually sees is a shocking image that turns all of our expectations of power, conquest and victory completely upside-down.

---

<sup>6</sup> Read Daniel 12

<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament in it's World*, 833

<sup>8</sup> Read Genesis 49 and Isaiah 11

## The Lamb Who Was Slain

*Revelation 5:6-14*

John hears the good news about the Lion of the tribe of Judah, but then when he turns around, he sees a Lamb that had been sacrificed but is now alive. This Lamb comes to the Almighty God<sup>9</sup> and takes the scroll from his right hand. The Lamb who was slain is given all authority in heaven and on earth, and he is the one who sets in motion the events that will bring all the kingdoms and empires of this world under the authority of the kingdom of God and his Messiah.<sup>10</sup>

This shocking image of Jesus the Messiah conquering and receiving all authority as the slain Lamb is arguably the most crucial aspect of understanding the Book of Revelation.

Highlighting the intentional contrast of the lion and lamb images, Richard Bauckham writes:

“[It is crucial that we] recognize the contrast between what [John] hears (5:5) and what he sees (5:6). He hears that ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, had conquered’. The two messianic titles evoke a strong militaristic and nationalistic image of the Messiah of David as conqueror of the nations, destroying the enemies of God’s people... But this image is reinterpreted by what John sees: the Lamb whose sacrificial death (5:6) has redeemed people from all nations (5:9-10). By juxtaposing the two contrasting images, John has forged a new symbol of conquest by sacrificial death.”

Michael Gorman emphasizes the way this vision alters our perspective on power when he writes:

“In Revelation the nature of power is being redefined. The power of the Lamb in Revelation takes two forms: the power of his death, the symbol of which is the slaughtered lamb, and the power of his spoken word, the symbol of which is the sword of his mouth (1:16).”

For many of us, the Book of Revelation offers a much needed deconstruction and reconstruction of our understanding of the world around us, our understanding of God, our understanding of power and our understanding of what it means for Christians to conquer with Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Read Daniel 7

<sup>10</sup> This is the great proclamation that is heard at the blowing of the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15.

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 114

Reigning with Jesus is often not what we think it is nor what we want to believe it is. John's vision of the slain Lamb reveals that the promised kingdom of God was inaugurated, not through an act of powerful military force, but through the suffering and sacrificial death of the Messiah.

And to pick back up with the Exodus theme that John is referencing, Jesus is the servant of God and the sacrificial Lamb who has rescued us as God's people and who is now leading us into the promised land of a new creation. His exaltation upon the cross was the subversive way that he conquered evil and became enthroned as the King over all nations on earth. He is the one who is redeeming the human race and who has made us into a kingdom of priests to our God. We are to follow the Lamb into the new creation, and this means that we must follow *'the way of the Lamb'*.

What do we mean by following *'the way of the Lamb'*?

We must seek to conquer in the same way that Jesus has conquered – through verbalizing the truth about God and living out that truth through uncompromising obedience to God. It means that we must be faithful disciples of our Master Jesus and be his faithful witnesses to the world around us even if that might lead to opposition, harassment and an unjust, excruciating death.

The image of the slain Lamb reveals the true nature of our God, and what it actually means to be faithful witnesses of God and his Messiah. This shocking image reveals the mystery of how God is actually conquering the world and what Jesus means when he calls us to conquer with him.

John's vision of God's heavenly throne room ends with the Lamb beside the Almighty God on his throne, and they are both being worshipped as the Creator, Savior and King of the Universe. This image reveals the essential theology of the Book of Revelation: The Almighty God of Israel is the Creator and King of the Universe who is worthy of our complete devotion, and Jesus the Messiah is the slain Lamb of God who shares in God's reign and who is also worthy of our total allegiance. In the words of N.T. Wright, "Jesus, the lion-lamb, Israel's Messiah, the true man, shares the worship which belongs uniquely and exclusively to the one creator God."<sup>12</sup>

John's vision of God's heavenly throne room reveals that Jesus the Messiah – the Lamb who was slain but is alive again – is the only who is worthy to lead and guide human history to its intended conclusion. The scroll that had been sealed for all these years has been given to him, and now he's about to open it.

---

<sup>12</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament in its World*, 834

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. John's vision of God's heavenly throne room communicates a clear message to his readers. John has seen the ultimate royal court and the highest throne in the universe, and the Roman Emperor (nor the President of the United States) is nowhere to be found. The Almighty God of Israel is the one seated on this throne; he alone is the Creator and true King of the Universe.

*In what way does John's vision of God on his throne (described in chapter 4) speak to your soul and impact the way that you see the world around you?*

2. After John's initial observation of the scene surrounding God's throne, he notices a scroll in the right hand of God that has been sealed up with seven wax seals. However, there is a pivotal problem that is proclaimed by an angel in the heavenly throne room. There is no human in all the world who has been found worthy to open this scroll.

*What is the significance of this scroll that is sealed in God's right hand and the declaration that there is no human on earth who has been found worthy to open it? What are some other passages of Scripture that describe the dilemma being portrayed here?*

3. The Book of Revelation offers a much needed deconstruction and reconstruction of our understanding of the world around us, our understanding of God, our understanding of power and our understanding of what it means for Christians to conquer with Jesus.

*Based on what we have learned so far, what does it mean for Christians to conquer with Jesus? What does it mean for us to follow the Lamb into the new creation? And how does this reshape our perspective of God and our definition of power?*

4. John's vision of God's heavenly throne room ends with the Lamb beside the Almighty God on his throne, and they are both being worshipped as the Creator, Savior and King of the Universe.

*Which of the five songs from Revelation 4-5 resonate with you the most and in what way can these songs help shape your time in prayer?*