

STUDIES IN REVELATION —

(4) WHO IS IN CONTROL OF THE WORLD?

Bible Passage : Revelation 4

Although not new, over the last forty years or so the term ‘conspiracy theory’ has passed in common usage. Often the term is used as a put down for people who think the world is against them—no there is no conspiracy theory. However one of the reasons that the term has become so popular is that many people hang onto conspiracy theories to explain the world in which we live. And very often those conspiracy theories get a grip where events have such an impact on people that they cannot accept straightforward explanations.

So for example after WWI many people developed the theory that the war was really started and kept going by businessmen as a form of war profiteering. Many Germans were led to believe that there was a conspiracy by politicians and Jews which led them to surrender when they were winning the war. And of course we are familiar with all kinds of conspiracy theories that have arisen to explain more recent traumatic events—the shooting President Kennedy, the Twin Towers attacks, Princess Diana’s death, etc.

As distrust in governments and politicians has grown over the last half a century people have increasingly come to believe in ‘conspiracy theories.’ These theories centre upon illegal, sinister forces, bent on wickedness in order to monopolise their own power. Very often the belief for some people is that such forces control the world. In our quest to understand the traumatic, that which we have no control over ourselves, people want to believe that someone is in control. Even if it is for evil purposes.

The question of who is in control of the world is one of the dominant questions in the book of Revelation. In a world where the Roman Empire is supreme. In a world where the Roman Emperor is regarded as divine and having ultimate power over life and death. Indeed in a world which was awash with conspiracy theories, even though they did not use the term, the question was who was in control. Was it really the Emperor? Was it Satan? Was it the gods? Or was it God? It is the answer to this question which will dominate chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation and set the tone for the rest of the book.

Chapter 4 begins a new section of the book. It introduces us to second vision, the dominant vision in the book, which will run until almost the end of the book. Chapters 2 and 3 have dealt with ‘what is now.’ (1:19) This vision corresponds to ‘what will take place later.’

In vs 1 John sees a door open into heaven and once again he hears the voice like the trumpet—the voice of Jesus. This time the voice comes not from behind but from above. And Jesus calls John to enter through the door into heaven. And once there Jesus promises him, ‘I will show you what must take place after this.’ And once again John finds himself in the Spirit—that visionary experience peculiar to God’s prophets.

Immediately he says ‘before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.’ (vs 2) This is the centre of John’s heavenly vision, the throne, the seat of rule. John however is careful not to convey anything of the features of the one who sits on the throne. He does not

want to break, nor does he want his readers to break, the second commandment of making an image of God. But he goes on to describe this throne in such a way that is not only brilliant but leaves the reader in doubt who the occupant of the throne is. That it is God.

He tells us that 'the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian.' These were precious stones, both reddish in colour, but which also had the property of diffusing light. So John wants to convey to us a throne and a figure radiant with light. He echoes Paul's description of God 'who lives in inapproachable light whom no-one has seen or can see.' Here is John's portrait of the brilliance of God's appearance.

This vision of brilliance is further enhanced by the fact that the throne is surrounded by an emerald rainbow (vs 3). It is a description of God's appearance that echoes that of His appearance in Ezekiel 1:28. But the appearance of this rainbow is not only dazzling. It is also a reminder of God's covenant faithfulness. The rainbow being the sign that God gave to Noah after the flood, that He was a covenant keeping God.

Then John's attention is drawn to the thrones that surround the throne. There are twenty-four of these. And on these are seated twenty-four elders dressed in white and with crowns of gold. The question immediately arises as to who these figures are. And here we have one of those puzzles that are dotted about the book of Revelation. Some commentators see them as symbol of the church. And in Revelation the number 24—2 x 12—appears in this way as a symbol of God's redeemed people in both the OT and the NT. However the 24 elders as they appear throughout the book of Revelation also appear to be distinct from the church. They are servants of God, like angels, who worship God and do His bidding. So it perhaps seems best to see these 24 elders simply as themselves. Heavenly

beings who form part of the royal court or entourage.

In vs 5 our attention is drawn back once again to the throne itself. And John witnesses that from the throne 'came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.' Again these were OT signs of God's presence that were especially associated with God's appearance to Israel at Sinai. Also we see that before the throne are seven blazing lamps which John tells us 'are the seven spirits of God.' Again our minds are taken back to chapter 1 where these 'seven spirits' representing the Holy Spirit are said to be before the throne of God. Then John tells us that before the throne 'was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.' (vs 6) This same symbol is found in the OT variously described as a pavement or expanse of crystal or sapphire.

So here John portrays before us this awesome portrait of the heavenly throne room. And John through this use of vivid symbolism drawn from the OT conveys to us that there seated upon the throne is God Himself. The throne rooms and palaces of earthly kingdoms are magnificent. But there is nothing that can compare to this heavenly throne room. The Roman emperors were great builders. It was their way of celebrating themselves and leaving their mark upon posterity. The palaces, temples and amphitheatres that they built were meant to leave those who viewed them in awe. But their buildings were insignificant compared to the vision that John presents to us here of the throne of God.

Now this initial vision of God that we find in chapter 4 is obviously meant to inspire in us a sense of awe. Not simply through the portrait that John conveys but also by the fact that the God who is portrayed in this way far surpasses what we discover here. But alongside this awe-inspiring vision John is also seeking to convey to us the fact that the one who is seated upon the throne is none other than the God who has revealed Himself in previous times to

the people of Israel. He is seeking to convey to us that here is the covenant keeping God of the OT. That He is still the sovereign Lord who reigns and is faithful to His people. This is the significance of the various OT allusions and especially the rainbow appearance and the thunder and lightning which remind us of God's appearance at Sinai.

And we must recognise the significance of this portrayal for those original hearers with all the problems that they faced in their churches. Especially as they faced this problem of the gathering storm of persecution. Here was this wonderfully reassuring truth—that not only was the sovereign Lord upon the throne but that He was a faithful covenant keeping God.

And this is one of the great truths of Christian theology. That whenever we come to contemplate God as He reveals Himself to us in Scripture we are not dealing with an abstract concept. We are not dealing with great philosophical concepts. Rather we are brought face to face with God as He stands in relationship to His people. We are brought face to face with what God is for us. We are not confronted with the question of whether or not God can move an immovable object. We are not confronted with the intricacies of inter-trinitarian relationships. We are brought face to face with God as He stands in relationship to us and to the world that He has made. And here we see this demonstrated in this message of the sovereign Lord upon the throne and how He is a faithful covenant keeping God.

And that is a truth that ought to be of the utmost encouragement to us. We may not be facing imminent persecution. But in whatever circumstances we find ourselves face to face with today here is the most wonderfully reassuring truth—that the sovereign Lord is a faithful covenant keeping God. That He will be to us all that He has promised to be to us in His word. He will be to us all that He has promised to be to us through His Son. God will not fail us. God will not forsake us. He will be faithful to us because He cannot deny Himself.

So many of the difficulties that we face in the Christian life arise from the fact that very often we have an impoverished vision of God. We're not going to receive visions of God like John. But John's vision of God and others are recorded in Scripture so that we might read them, study them and be refreshed by them. So that we too might be taken up with those soul refreshing visions of God. So that we might understand God as He stands in relation to us and to the world that He has made. The sad reality is that very often in the midst of our problems, whatever they may be, we retreat. We withdraw into ourselves and into our problems, instead of seeking those refreshing visions of God. Those visions that will lift our eyes above the mundane, as we contemplate the sovereign Lord in His covenant faithfulness.

In vs 6-11 John's attention moves away from the throne. And his eyes are drawn to the creatures surrounding the throne. To their appearance, their activities, and their words. John has already mentioned the 24 elders. Now in vs6-8 he describes the four living creatures who stand around God's throne. These living creatures are like a lion, an ox, a man and a flying eagle respectively. But we also see that each of these creatures is covered in eyes and has six wings.

These creatures bear a close similarity to the creatures described in Ezekiel 1 who accompany God. Their wings also show their similarity to the seraphs in Isaiah 6. The similarities and dissimilarities remind us that we are not dealing here with photographs of these creatures but with prophetic symbolism.

One commentator lists over twenty interpretations of who these 4 creatures are. The best way to identify them is to consider the role that they play in the book of Revelation. And there we find both that they stay close to the throne and that they worship God. Like the 24 elders they are heavenly beings who exist to serve and worship God. Their appearance is important in that the lion represents strength, the ox

service, the man wisdom and the eagle swiftness. All of these attributes are applied in the service and worship of God. The multiple eyes which are mentioned twice speak to us of their omniscience—they all seeing and searching knowledge. And their wings remind us that they are holy creatures in the service of a holy God.

And we hear their song, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.' It is a great song of praise that reminds us why God is to be worshipped. These creatures exist to worship God. And they do so because He is holy. In other words He is the one who exists before all things in the complete splendour of His own moral majesty. He is not to be worshipped for what He has done but He is to be worshipped because of who He is.

This theme is then reiterated when we see in vs 10 how the 24 elders join in this song of worship. We read how they fall down before God's throne. Here are these majestic creatures. Who if we were to meet them we would be awestruck in their presence. Yet even they fall down in the presence of God and lay their crowns before Him. And they 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.' Again it is that same theme—God is to be worshipped for who He is. He is the creator of all things. If you were to ask the 4 living creatures and the 24 elders why God is to be worshipped, they would simply say, 'because of who He is.'

Now as we have noted in previous studies this is one of the big issues facing these Christians in the seven churches, the question of who is to be worshipped. The answer to that question in society was the Emperor was to be worshipped. The Emperor was to be worshipped as Lord and God. But the answer provided to that question by John is a rather different one. God alone is to be worshipped, for He alone is God. He alone is holy. He alone is the creator of all things.

Now there are many issues raised here in the activities of the heavenly beings but I want to highlight this issue of worship.

The first thing we might mention is the place of worship in our lives. Worship is part of our nature. We are all worshippers. We all give supreme worth in our lives to something. It may be our families, our houses, our careers. It may be money, sex, power, achievement. It may be our idea of God. It may be fate, chance, chaos. More often than not to some greater or lesser extent we give supreme worth to ourselves. Worship is part of our nature. That is how God has made us as worshipping beings.

He has of course made us to worship Him. And where we do not give supreme worth to Him in our lives then our faculty for worship has become corrupted and perverted.

Now in our cynical, anti-authoritarian age we are apt to ask, why should we worship God? To which Revelation 4 gives us that two-fold answer. We should worship God because He is worthy. And we should worship God because He has created us as worshipping creatures. To worship God is our duty. We will not of course like the answer that we should worship God because that is our duty but that is the way things are. We are not free to worship whoever we choose, for God has created us to worship Him. And Him alone.

But whilst worship is our duty, secondly, if we understand worship aright, then it will also be our delight. Picture again the 24 elders and the four living creatures. There they are standing in the immediate presence of God. There they are beholding God in His glory. And what do they do? Day and night they worship God. Day and night they worship God in the splendour of His holiness. Day and night they declare that He is worthy to receive, glory and honour and power. It is all their delight to perform this wonderful task. Because there before the throne, as they behold the majesty of God, they are moved to worship Him.

The reason that God has created us as worshipping beings is not because of any need He has in Himself to be worshipped. But He has made us worshipping beings that we might delight in Him. That we might receive joy through worshipping Him. But the entry of sin into our world has distorted not only our capacity for worship but our view of God. We have lost the delight and now we see only duty. And in our sinful rebellion we reject the duty. We move our allegiances elsewhere. We seek our delight elsewhere rather than in God.

But such false worship has a two-fold effect. On the one hand it brings with it the wrath of God. It brings the wrath of God because those who are His creatures and are made for His worship now give their worship to other things. And God holds us accountable and will punish us for our false worship, unless we repent.

The other effect of false worship is that it robs us of the joy for which God has created us. God has created us for the joy that comes through worshipping Him and Him alone. But because we have rejected Him it means that we seek to satisfy ourselves upon forms of joy that can never satisfy us. Because there is quite simply not enough joy in those things to satisfy us. Yes, there is joy in all kinds of things. But it will not satisfy the capacity for joy which God has created us with. A capacity for joy that is so immense that it is only found through worshipping Him.

I trained in marketing after leaving university. I sat through all the classes on marketing, advertising, public relations, developing strategies and budgets, organising campaigns. I couldn't wait to get a job and start to implement all this. Then a job came along. And I was given such fascinating tasks as picking things up from the printers, typing up the captions on photographs, collecting clippings from the newspapers etc. It became immensely frustrating and I left after a few months. I was extremely frustrated that I wasn't fulfilling the role for which I had been trained.

And that is like us and the worship for which we have been created by God. God has made us for worship and to find joy in that worship. But until we discover that, then we will spend our time in the pursuit of forms of worship and joy which can never satisfy us. Those forms of joy and worship will always fall short of our expectations. We will always be looking for joy beyond the next hill top.

To know God and to worship Him is the great delight for which God has made us. It is a joy and delight that is beyond compare. For the more we come to know Him, the more satisfying and delightful our worship becomes. And the great truth is that that joy and that delight is unending. For, those who know and worship God, will spend eternity growing to know Him more and worshipping Him endlessly. Their never-ending song of worship and adoration will be added to the worship and adoration of the heavenly beings. And the longer we go on in heaven the greater will be our delight, the greater will be our joy. The joyful worship of God in heaven will never be diminished it will only increase. As CS Lewis put it such joy is the serious business of heaven.

To worship God is our duty. To worship God aright is a delight. Thirdly, we delight to worship God as we come to know Him. We delight to worship Him because with John we grasp this vision of who God is—majestic in the splendour of His holiness, the creator of all things and the rule of all things. As we come to know such a God then it is our joy and delight to worship Him because we know that the one who has called this universe into being continues to rule over all that He has made. He is the first and the last. He knows the end from the beginning. Indeed He is both the beginning and the end. And what a joy it is to know and worship this God.

To know that whatever may be going on in our lives. What ever may be going on in our world. Whatever may be going on in the church. The God who has created all things holds this world in His hands. He holds us in His hands.

As such we realise that this world is not spinning out of control. Our lives are not spinning out of control. Our world is not controlled by secret forces bent on evil. Our world is ruled by God. God is on the throne. The Sovereign Lord who is faithful to His people. Who is faithful to all who delight to worship Him in Spirit and in truth.

Who rules our world? John's answer is that God rules our world. And the God who rules our world is the God who is majestic in His holiness. The God who has created all things for His pleasure. The God who has created humanity to share in His joy by worshipping Him.

Message: Who is in control of the world?

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