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Preacher: Graham Heaps

[0 : 00] If you have a Bible in front of you, would you please turn with me to Revelation chapter 4, a passage that Barry read for us earlier, Revelation chapter 4.

It's confessional time, I need to confess to you, I'm a bit of a news junkie, so the television news is often on in our house.

But I meet quite a lot of people these days who have given up watching the news because it is so depressing and indeed so disturbing.

We do live in disturbing times, don't we? The desperate situation following the earthquake and tsunami in Japan has been kind of pushed away from our headlines by the events in Libya.

So we've gone from incredible, in inverted commas, natural catastrophe to war or at least very serious situation in a country which is really not so far away from us.

[1 : 38] And these things are very disturbing. And let me assure you that there are many, many more disturbing things that are happening in this world that only don't appear on our news because we get weary of them.

And so they don't come back and back and back. It's very interesting, for example, the situation in Zimbabwe where he continues to be desperate.

A dictator there who has inflicted incredible pain on his citizens of his country, but we've not felt the need to intervene in that situation.

Even though the horrors of war are combined with the horrors of starvation in that country. It makes you think, does it not?

And then you look near a home, you turn on the news and there's all sorts of stuff which just underlines the moral decay in our country and its rejection of everything to do with the Christian faith.

[2 : 50] You walk around town, walk around Dewsbury and extraordinary numbers of people who fit now into what they call the underclass. Dewsbury used to be a working class town, it's now an underclass town.

There are a multitude of people, 40% of households in Dewsbury are directly affected by severe drug addiction. That is, there are people in those houses who either take drugs themselves or their lives are greatly affected by their extended family or people they know.

40% of people's lives are severely touched by drug addiction. Something like one person in seven in our country is a serious drug addict.

And if you add alcohol to that, the situation is far worse. And then the church in the UK is incredibly weak. We lack power and influence, we lack integrity and inner strength.

We are increasingly marginalised. Most churches are in survival mode. We are not reaching out to the kind of people who don't darken the doors of our churches.

[4 : 09] And all this is unsettling to faith. It's even unsettling to unbelief. A number of people who tell you they're atheists, or they don't know what they believe, who are profoundly disturbed by everything that I've just reminded you of.

So the question comes, where do we find hope and reassurance living in the world as it is? Well let me tell you that the very purpose of the book of Revelation is to provide that help, that support, that hope, that reassurance.

Now the book of Revelation is a closed book to many Christians. We look at it and we find these strange images difficult to manage, difficult to understand, and therefore are apt to give up on it.

But we should not do that because it's given by Christ himself to his church for the very purpose of helping us in hard times.

He says at the very beginning of Revelation, blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy. Happy is the one who reads the word of this prophecy. And happy are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it because the time is near.

[5 : 37] This is not about some far distant future. This is about the past and the present as well as about the future.

Or at least it is according to our Lord Jesus Christ here. And the book of Revelation is a very, very straightforward book in many ways.

It's difficult because we're no longer in the library, we're in the picture gallery. But what it shows us is the world in turmoil, say from chapter 6 onwards, many frightening images of trouble and difficulty.

It shows us a weak church facing persecution. Chapters 2 and 3 show us 7 churches. Two are on the verge of death. Three of them are in real trouble and only two could be described as healthy. So it's a strangely honest and compelling book. But it also gives us, and that's where we are this morning, gives us as a great foundational truth to hang on to.

[6 : 50] The great reality of this universe. And that we find here in chapter 4 and again in chapter 5.

A vision of the ultimate reality of the living God on the throne of the universe. And I want you to find reassurance and hope in these distressing times from this passage of scripture as we look at it this morning.

The first thing that stands out to you in Revelation chapter 4 is that the throne of heaven is occupied. There is a throne over this universe and there is one who sits upon the throne.

That is what dominates heaven. That's the obvious thing here. What's the first thing that John sees as he has taken up in the spirit to see how things are in heaven?

Well the very first thing he sees is a throne with someone sitting on it. And it's interesting, everything else that is described, that he describes for us in chapter 4, he describes in terms of its relation to the throne.

[8 : 09] The end of verse 3 he says, a rainbow resembling an emerald encircled the throne. And then he talks about these elders who are on seats surrounding this throne.

And then in verse 5, he talks about what comes from the throne. These flashes of lightning and rumblings and pearls, peals of thunder.

And then he tells us in verse 6, before the throne there is this sea of glass. And then he tells us, around the throne are the four living creatures.

Do you see what he's doing? Everything that he shows us, he just tells us of its relationship to the throne and to the one who sits upon the throne.

And the throne is mentioned 12 times in these 11 verses. John is making a point. What is the great thing about heaven?

[9 : 17] If you could have the curtain, as it were, torn back and you could see into heaven this morning, what would you see? You would see a throne and a glorious one who sits upon it.

And what is the significance of this? Well, it means that the world is not the rudderless, random, meaningless, uncontrolled place that the atheist declares it to be and wishes that it were.

It's a council of despair and hopelessness, but it is not true. The truth is the complete opposite. There is one who rules over all.

There is one who rules over everything that happens in this world. It's great news and it is the justification for seeing meaning in life.

Every human being, sooner or later, asks of all sorts of things is the question why. It is an absurd question for an atheist to ask.

[10 : 26] But it is written in human nature to ask that question. It is one of those clear evidences that we are made by a great God.

That atheism is a delusion. We can ask why. Because there is point and purpose. There is one on the throne.

But you see, the world also is not the random, meaningless place that it often seems to the Christian. We see disasters. We experience personal tragedy.

We have perplexing developments in our lives that trouble the face of the Christian. We see some going back on the faith.

We see the weakness of the church. We see the triumph of unbelief or seemingly so. We see strange providences and unanswered prayer. And it is so easy to draw us a despairing conclusion

from all these things.

[11 : 34] But it is not necessary. Because whatever it seems to us, the truth of the matter is the great reality of this world is that there is one who rules over it.

There is an occupied throne that dominates the whole of the created universe. And Jesus Christ describes in chapters 2 and 3 of this book churches in trouble by and large.

And even those that are doing well are weak. And what do churches in trouble need? What do Christians need? We need to see that God is on the throne.

We need this great reality of this amazingly complex, confusing universe and world. The greatest secret of all is that there is a throne that dominates.

Not only heaven, but everything. God is still on the throne. Do not lose sight of that. You don't need to stop watching the news on the television because it makes you feel despair.

[12 : 54] You need to understand that we live in a world under judgment, but a world in which God's mercy is still evident and he is still on the throne.

Everything revolves around the ruler who sits on the throne of heaven. That is how it is. Secondly, notice that the one unthroned over all is fit to be there.

He is fit to be there. Now it's quite striking is this. What does John say about the one who sits on the throne? Well in one level he says almost nothing.

All he tells us directly is the first half of verse three. The appearance and the one who sat there had the appearance of Jasper and Cornelia.

And that is the sum and substance of it. Then he passes on to everything, all the surroundings. And that description which means almost nothing to us simply says the one who sits on the throne has indescribable majesty and awesome beauty.

[14 : 07] And absolutely nothing is given us to help us to visualise him. And that my friends is absolutely deliberate.

He lives in light unapproachable. He is the one whom no one has seen or can see.

We're not to make images of God. No, not even in our mind. Even word pictures diminish him. It's like sorry to come to the east coast and say this but I was a student 40 years ago in Aberystwyth on the Welsh coast and amazing sights if you've got a really wonderful sunset.

I couldn't begin to describe it to you. Sometimes you see either see it or you see pictures of it and if you didn't know it was a photograph or you didn't know there it was before your eyes you would say the sky is never that colour.

Just indescribable wonder in the same way it is impossible to describe the living God and yet although only those two little expressions are used to describe God here and then you pass on to other things yet there is an awful lot that we are told in this passage about God he is truly revealed here.

[15 : 50] What do I mean? Well run through it very briefly with me. After we're told about God's indescribable majesty and awesome beauty we're told about other things.

There's the rainbow. What does that remind you of? Went to a funeral a week and a half ago of a dear friend of mine and as we stood by the grave apart from the fact that just briefly it teemed with rain and after that there was this incredible rainbow.

Absolutely wonderful and such an encouragement regarding my Christian friend who had died.

Wonderful encouragement because the rainbow is a symbol of the grace of God.

Never again will I destroy this world God says. God's rainbow here reminds us he is a God who is kind to all creation.

He is the life giving God. And then in verse 5 we read about the flashes of lightning rumblings and peals of thunder. What does that remind you of?

[17 : 07] Well if you know your history of the Bible it will remind you of Mount Sinai. God comes down to give his law to his people this threateningly just God awesome majestic intimidating dangerous and then we have this strange point about these seven torches which are the seven spirits of God or the seven fold spirit of God there is a complexity about God which is he is beyond our understanding the triune God and then you see this sea in front of the throne and it's like a mill pond a bit like the sea is here today this great mill pond whereas the book of Revelation is constantly telling us that the nations are like a churning sea but God is calm and nothing as it were unruffles him his reactions are always measured and right nothing disturbs him he knows everything in advance and then what are the creatures cry out about this God three times they say

he is holy what does that mean well it's different that's what the word means he is different he is transcendent he is above all he is apart every quality that we share with him his is so much greater and richer and purer including his love what is our love compared to his love that gave his own beloved son for us then we're twice told here he is the one who lives forever and ever verses 9 and 10 he's the eternal one oh how fast our lives run away how important it is that we are ready to meet God because it's just like flicking your finger and you've moved from childhood to old age but God he is endlessly full of life and vitality how I wish I could do some of the things I could do 30 40 years ago can't do them anymore

God has no such problem he is the creator and sustainer of all things you created all things this is what the elders cry to him and they're right everything is made he has made it not only has he made it according to his own mind and will but the very fact that it keeps going nothing not the son not nothing at all not you not me none of us keep going for a second without the power of God he is the one who holds all things together the one enthroned over all is fit to be on the throne he is altogether worthy that's the great conclusion of this passage that's what the elders say you are worthy oh lord our lord and god you are worthy the wonderful thing about this revelation is not just that there is someone on the throne this is not a meaningless universe but goodness and justice and calmness and reasonableness and purity and unchangeableness are enthroned what a glorious message and truth that is so often the men who rule in this world they're a menace they have no moral right to be there we ought to be grateful for the politicians we have when you think about

Gaddafi or Mugabe men like this but the one who ultimately is over all he is worthy we need this revelation providence is ambiguous sometimes we can't work out what's going on and it seems intimidating and horrible it seems as if somebody horrible could be in control but that is not the truth the bad things that we see sometimes we misjudge them they're just what we need but we think of them as bad because they're not quite what we want to or if they're really bad they're the fruit of sin in this world a world that is under judgment and God is constantly overruling these things for the genuine good and health of every one of his children we need this revelation it's given to us by Christ lest in our despondency over life we misread providence and all our hearts are disturbed this one who sits on the throne he can and should be trusted he is fit to be there and that is a glorious truth and the third and final thing is this firstly we see there is an occupied throne in heaven really is this world is ruled over in the detail of it and secondly we understand that the one who rules is worthy to be there he is fit to be there and finally that the right and appropriate response to him is worship it is worship that's the response of all the inhabitants of heaven it's a highly symbolic vision this is not youtube this is a vision a picture graphic abstract art here or at least highly imaginative picture so we see these 24 elders on the thrones they have white clothes they're pure they have crowns they have triumphed their number is surely significant the 12 tribes of israel the 12 apostles of the foundation of the new testament whatever they are they are certainly our representatives in glory keeping our seats warm if you like and then there are the four living creatures these strange beings like seraphs each one representing or looking like certain kinds of creatures and yet they all have these eyes everywhere and these wings these six wings and they are symbolic surely of all that God has made because here we have firstly the lion the fiercest of creatures and then the ox the strongest of creatures and then the man the wisest of creatures in theory at least and the eagle the fastest and what are they all doing what are all the inhabitants of heaven doing well they're all doing the same thing whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives forever the 24 elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever they're all doing the same thing there are no dissenters in heaven not one who is not worshipping him the right the appropriate response to him is worship and notice the quality of this worship these people are utterly these beings they're utterly preoccupied with God day and night they never stop saying holy holy holy is the Lord God almighty they're absolutely wholehearted there are no yawns there are no wandering minds this is intelligent worship you're worthy to receive glory and honour and power because you created all things all these amazing things and by your will all these good things these kind things to us by your will they are created and still have their being and there's a wonderful spontaneity about this whenever the living creatures give glory the elders join in there is wonder here and esteem and gratitude and this interesting little incident whereby these elders who have crowns they cast them down throw them down before

God because they recognise that he alone is worthy to rule he is the only one worthy of praise there's nothing even though these things are given for service what is the service of God but an immense privilege it is a right and appropriate response the only right and appropriate response to him is worship my friend are you ready for this there is no other heaven but a heaven in which God is worshipped now I know that when Christ comes again there will be a new heaven and a new earth and life if I understand it right life then will not be a continual service of worship worship but it will be a life of worship of honouring God of gladly putting him in his right place there is no other heaven but where God is adored and owned as Lord of all are you ready for it but let me ask you are you part of this are you engaged in this now the glory of our worship is that we meet here this morning as an outpost of heaven engaged in heavenly activity do you know

[28 : 29] I've come across a bizarre idea people sometimes have said to me our meetings together as Christians have nothing to do with worship how extraordinary that is the future is all about worship the Old Testament lays such stress on worship the bits of scripture which are supposed to tell us that it's all about edification talk about praying and singing to God of course it's all about worship it's important that those who lead worship or those who take part speak in such a way that other people understand so they can join in that's vital but life is about worship about living for God are you part of this it is the ultimate rebellion to stand at a distance and simply to watch on aloof when others adore the great

God my friend if you don't worship here heaven will never be your home you wouldn't want to be there the alternative is appalling God is worthy of our worship you need to read on from revelation four into revelation five and to see that even for rebels even for those who have not worshipped perhaps you've got to thirty forty fifty sixty seventy eighty years without ever truly bowing before God and owning him as God there is still pardon and hope today but there may not be tomorrow but today there is you can meet this God you can know his forgiveness he has provided a saviour for you a sacrifice the Lord

Jesus Christ who because he is so awesomely great the value of his death is sufficient even to wash everything from your record and to reconcile you to God and make you acceptable to him there is a lot about this world that is very disturbing but it's much less disturbing if you grasp this vision and its message that God our God is on the throne all revolves around him he's in charge of everything nothing happens without his express purpose I've seen two tragedies about the book of Revelation I've seen Christians who find it hard so they don't read it they don't even attempt to get the nuts the basic message of it even though it's intended by the saviour to encourage our hearts but the other tragedy

I've seen is that Christians have a speculative interest in everything it says about the future and often extreme and fail to see the present realities that it shows Christ with his church though it is weak and feeble in chapter one and God on the throne over all so that nothing threatens him or his purposes we need to see it think about it act and react in line with it live in the light of this great reality why is it that we think it's only for children God is still on the throne and he will remember his own his promise is true he will not forget you God is still on the throne not going to sing that to close but we are going to sing number fourteen

I'll praise my maker while I've breath Lord give us to see clearly the vision that John saw we thank you for the truth that the throne of this universe is not empty we do not live in chaos and meaninglessness we thank you even more the one who rules you the great and mighty and awesome God you are worthy to rule only you can rule you are mighty but you are good and full of grace and Lord we thank you for everything of heaven that we find by your grace in our hearts and every sense of joy that we know in response to this great truth

[34 : 06] Lord help us in the hardest circumstances to remember that you are God and even more astonishingly that by the grace of Christ you are our God Lord indeed may you be the God of each one bowed before you now and Lord for some that means new life life transforming grace needs to come to them perhaps they don't even know it Lord come in mighty power to us all make us all worshippers we pray glad whole whole hearted delighted to worship so great a being and feeling an immense privilege to know your grace we ask these things in Jesus name Amen Amen Amen

Amen AM