

West Valley Church
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Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Three: Our Response
Revelation 4:1-5:14

We have just sung words from Revelation 4 & 5, I didn't know if you realized that. That is our passage for today. I want to give you a head start in your Bibles to turn to Revelation chapter 4 & 5, because once I get into it there won't be any time for you to find it. It's at the end of your Bible, so look at the very last book and you should be good – chapter 4 and chapter 5.

It's an honor to be here and to be able to speak and be a part of this series. As we started as a pastoral team looking at what we could do this summer and what we might want to speak about, the subject of Revelation came up. It just seemed like the right thing to do because it is something that has been so overlooked. I have been raised in the church and I have heard very few sermons on Revelation, and those I heard were very fear-based. So to be able to come before you and to share from this book is a privilege. As we were getting together and thinking about what this series could look like, there were three things we knew we wanted to accomplish:

1. We wanted these sermons to not only showcase what Revelation was about, but how we can study the Bible, how we can learn to read the Bible and understand what it means to us today. Not just Revelation, but the entire Bible.
2. We wanted to get into the symbols and imagery that were known and would be understood by the first century church, to really talk about that and dive into that.
3. We wanted to showcase what that really means for us here, now, right here in America, right here in West Valley. What does this truth mean to us? What do we do with this truth?

I was reminded of a time in my life when I had a struggle with literature. It was my senior year of high school and I was taking an honors English class. It was an AP English class which was advanced placement and it was all these people who knew a lot more about literature than me. In that class, basically we were to read the assigned reading and come to the class ready to discuss. That was it – we were reading and discussing. That sounded like it could be a lot of fun. For the most part I finished my reading on time. I would come to class ready to discuss. When I would hear the teacher and some of the students talking, I felt like maybe I had read the wrong book. I had read the wrong story because I had read this adventure and I had been really entertained and the book had made me happy and I had enjoyed it. I had come to class to discuss the enjoyable book that I had read. The other people were saying: "The struggle between these two characters really represents the trouble between good and evil. The river in this story represents the journey of life and how we need to make the most of it and not just coast along and ride along on this river."

And I was saying, “Why are you putting these words into this author’s mouth? He’s telling a story and it’s very entertaining and it’s an adventure.” I wasn’t alone, but, that was my grasp of literature. I couldn’t get past the face value of it being an entertaining story and I brought that along with me into my reading of the Bible.

I grew up in the church and I probably heard every Bible story and knew all the characters for the most part. I would say, “This is a hero and I want to be like him” or “This is not a hero and I don’t want to be like him.” The Bible can help you in those ways and you can go pretty far in them. I have heard the Bible is your manual for life, your blueprint for how you are to live your life. If you have a question, just go to the Bible. Alright. That’s good when you are a child. As you begin to grow up and your problems become a little bit bigger or you get into those gray areas, it’s really harder to find the answer to what you should really do. I start to see that this Gospel writer wrote it this way and it happened differently here. I don’t understand why the timeline is not the same. Along with other things in my life I began to doubt the Bible and I rejected it. I rejected God and I went away from the path I had started with my family and my parents. This led to a dark place in my life, a place where there wasn’t hope, there wasn’t joy. I realized I had experienced something much better than where I was. I came to a place where I needed to experience God in my life again. I accepted Him and I knew that I had experienced Him in my life. I had joy and I had peace that I could not have had, which I tried to get on my own and I couldn’t get. So the one thing I knew was that he was real and he was working again in my life.

So what was I to do with the Bible? I had to come to it humbly and as a learner. I knew I needed to get into the mind of the writer and of the audience of the text. Try to learn more about what was going on. I couldn’t be ignorant. I read stories and with a work of fiction, if you take it at face value that’s okay. You can just be entertained. But I knew the Bible is more than something to entertain me, so I could not be ignorant of what was going on inside. I had to put on my Indiana Jones hat. I don’t know how many people understand that reference, “Put on my Indiana Jones hat.” I had to become a Biblical archeologist – a studier of history. I had to become a Bible anthropologist – a studier of Biblical cultures. I had to study the original context and the meanings of the Bible.

So you say, “That’s pretty easy for you. You went to seminary and studied with lots of different people and that is one of the levels of study.” There are many levels of study. As a pastor and someone called into the ministry we go to colleges and universities and seminaries and studied under smart people who studied under really smart people who studied under Luther. Yes, there is something to that. As pastors we try to take in all that information and then present it to you. You have trusted us with this privilege to come before you with the Word and that is an honor in itself. That is a way to study, but not everyone here is going to sign up for some Bible classes at the online university. Some people do, and that’s okay. But maybe there is something more like a college-like class. Maybe that’s more your speed when it comes to studying the Bible. There are those available, even here in this church, if you want to get with me to really start studying things in a deeper way. Again, that is not for everybody, it’s not on everyone’s time schedule as well.

There’s another type of study, a Bible study, a weekly gathering with people going over the Bible, a place where you have mentors who can guide the direction. We also have one-on-

one mentorship available to study what the core ideas in the Old Testament are, what the core ideas in the New Testament are, so we can have a solid foundation for knowing the Bible and understanding God.

And of course there are times like this, the weekly sermons. Every time we preach, hopefully we are showing you a way that you can understand the Bible. Not just for that passage but for the entire Bible, a general way you can approach the Bible, to hear God at work and speaking to you.

There is personal Bible study. I hope everyone would be involved in studying their Bible daily. Maybe sometimes you just don't know how to approach it, so look for someone to mentor you or we have classes here at the church. We have a Core Class coming up that you can be a part of. Our Core Classes are a great way to learn more about your walk and how to study your Bible. There are many different ways.

How do we approach the Bible today, especially as we are talking about Revelation? Because it's going to be a lot different than the first century audience; we come to it with that modern mind. We're very information driven. We're very scientific. We like to know the facts and understand exactly what is going on and how it works. And we tend to not have a lack of creativity, maybe. We're a video society. We have everything given to us and shot at us in little ten second versions or we have a screen in our pocket and a screen on our wall and a screen in our office. We have big screens and little screens, and they all have video just shooting at us. We don't have to use our imagination for much of anything.

What I was reading about and thinking about was apocalyptic genre, which is what the book of Revelation is. It is such a different thing than any genre out there. And really, the apocalyptic genre was to the people of the first century and earlier what computer generated imagery, or CGI is to us. You can put me on a green screen and I can be standing right beside a dragon or I can be flying through the air like a super hero or I can pretend I caught this big fish and I really didn't. We don't have to imagine it, it can be put up there for us and we can just see anything we want. But the apocalyptic genre, this was a way for the writer to paint a picture with great imagery, to have the person step inside of what they were writing, to experience it.

Before we dive into the symbolism of this passage, we need to understand the context. Pastor Mike did a great job last week of setting the stage for the major cities that this letter is addressed to and where they each were individually and corporately as well. I recommend throughout the summer, go to our website and listen to the podcasts if you have missed one of the sermons. It will be a great reference for you. Point your friends and family to it as well, it will be a great reference for the church. So if you weren't here last week, please go back. As you'll hear throughout the summer, "We can't go back and say what the last person said; we don't have time for that today."

Pastor Mike explained the context of the Roman Empire; what it meant to be a Roman citizen and about the persecution of Christians by Romans. There was an atmosphere of emperor worship where you would be required to worship the emperor as if he were a god. And there were also Jewish roots in the early church of course. Christ came out of the Jewish tradition, so there would be a familiarity of Jewish tradition and scripture to that

church, and that's not just for Revelation. When we are thinking about our Bible reading we can remember that there was Jewish knowledge that would have been known.

I want you to write these down in your notes so you can look at them later. There are three books in the Bible in three specific areas that would have been very familiar to the early church: Daniel 7, Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 & 2. I would love you to read these sometime this week. I'm going to allude to them, but these are images with which the early church would have been familiar. When you've read these and read the passages we are about to read, it's like you have a head start on what's going on. So please go back and take a look at those.

So we're here to look at Revelation chapter 4 and 5 today. The symbols and meanings, they are there for the first century church. As you see in verse 1, this is a very transitional language. We're being called to see things from a different point of view, from the point of view of heaven. This would be a great time to open up Revelation chapter 4 and follow along with me as we go through. So we are looking from the point of view of heaven and the tone is being set. The Jewish believers would have seen these similarities to the scenes in Daniel and Isaiah and Ezekiel. This is the heavenly throne room. We see that someone is being seated on the throne. This act of being seated talks to the deity of the one being seated being God. His appearance in verse 3 is of jasper and carnelian. And there was a rainbow or a halo around the throne with the appearance of emerald. This reflects God's grandeur, his beauty, his majesty, his glory, his magnificence. It's very similar to a scene in Ezekiel 1:27-28:

“From what appeared to be his waist up, he looked like gleaming amber, flickering like a fire. And from his waist down, he looked like a burning flame, shining with splendor. All around him was a glowing halo, like a rainbow shining in the clouds on a rainy day. This is what the glory of the LORD looked like to me. When I saw it, I fell face down on the ground, and I heard someone's voice speaking to me.” (Ezekiel 1:27-28, nlt)

Does this sound familiar? “And then we saw 24 thrones and seated on the thrones were 24 elders.” Now there are many ideas about what this could mean and we may not really know the original meaning. But in fact there may be many multiple levels of meaning. Even in our modern literature and in the movies we watch, we're okay with there being multiple levels of meaning, like a dream within a dream sequence. There are all kinds of things we can wrap our brains around, so we can wrap our brains around all sorts of multiple levels of meaning. The first one that would be very familiar to that audience would be with that of the Greek drama, held in a huge amphitheater that would hold thousands of people. In a Greek drama there would be a 24 member chorus of actors. These actors would be wearing elaborate costumes with grotesque masks. The first century audience would be setting the stage for them. They would be paying attention to what is about to happen. These 24 elders could also represent two sets of elders. They could be old Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel and the new Israel, the twelve apostles of Jesus. We are seeing here the possibility of God's redemptive plan for creation coming to completion, beginning to end. These elders were clothed in white garments with gold crowns on their heads. These garments represent purity and the crowns represent victory and purity and the status in their relationship with Christ.

We are victorious. We are pure and royal through Christ. There are many references to golden crowns in Revelation. Even those who are trying to deceive, wear imitation golden crowns. Then we see the flashing of lightning and the rolling and rumbling of thunder. In Hebrew poetry, lightning and thunder represented power and glory to God. In Greek and Roman mythology we may all be aware that the thunder bolt was associated with Zeus or Jupiter.

Now today, we are still in awe when we see lightning across the sky or we feel the rumbling of the thunder in our bones. They still bring awe and wonder in the power to our lives.

So before the throne we see seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God. This is very familiar imagery from Ezekiel 1 – remember that is your homework, Ezekiel 1 – and the Jewish menorah, the candelabrum with seven candles that’s used in Jewish worship.

Now remember when we see the number seven which symbolizes what? Completeness. The number seven symbolizes completeness. So here we have at the throne the complete and perfect manifestation of the Holy Spirit, before the throne, as if it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

We’re reminded of the images from Ezekiel again or even the creation images from Genesis where God separates the sky and the sea. Those of us who have been to the sea or on the sea can testify to the vastness and the greatness, even on a calm day, the power that is underneath the water.

This is the setting of the magnificence of the throne room and the presence of God. Is John doing a pretty good job so far? So around the throne there were four living creatures. Now these creatures are very strange to us. It’s a mash-up of the heavenly beings from Ezekiel 10 and Isaiah 6 put together. They are full of eyes, in front and behind. Eyes are a symbol of alertness and knowledge. It’s really every parents’ dream to have eyes in the back of your head. Think of alertness and knowledge. That’s not too bad of an example.

Later on we see that there were six wings. These wings were full of eyes all around and within as well. This six-winged being is that of Isaiah 6 – same image. And this represents all these wings and eyes that represent constant vigilance. Sleepless vigilance. The eyes are penetrating eyes of knowledge and wisdom and of intelligence. Constant awareness. These creatures were like a lion, an ox, the face of a man and an eagle in flight. There are many ideas of what these creatures could represent, but more than likely it’s like some sort of personality or trait. The lion being that of strength and the ox being that of service, the face of a man intelligence and the eagle in flight, swiftness. Whatever the meaning, we must look at what they are doing. We must look at their actions. Verse 8 says:

“Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,’ who was, and is, and is to come.” (Revelation 4:8, niv)

These are very familiar words to us in the church. It’s part of our worship. These wise and vigilant creatures never stop worshipping. They proclaim, “Holy, holy, holy.” This three-time repetition intensifies and points to the greatness and the separateness and the purity of God. It’s quite different from the emperor worship of the first century Roman culture. And the one who was and is and is to come. God is. God exists outside of the constraints of time. Nothing is beyond God’s control. So we see the stage has been set. We have been

given a rich and awesome picture of the throne room of heaven. And the 24 elders fall down in humility, throwing down their crowns, giving away any authority of power they might have, in subject to the one who is seated on the throne, saying "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things and by your will they existed and were created." Their worship proclaims that there is no other thing that is worthy of worship than Lord God, Creator of the universe. No person, no emperor, no thing is worthy of worship but God.

And so we see the new setting of a scene in chapter 5 with the words, "Then I saw." We saw in his right hand there was a scroll. It was written within and on the back. It was sealed with seven seals. So the right hand emphasizes power and authority. And this scroll is important, it's full and it's been written on the front and the back and all over. And it is completely sealed. Remember the number seven. It is completely inaccessible. No unauthorized person could gain access to the scroll.

And the next several verses address this problem. "Who is worthy to open the scroll, to break the seals?" (Revelation 5:2b) No one! John begins to weep. These scrolls are important, and no one in heaven or earth is worthy to open them. In verse 5 we hear:

"Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." (Revelation 5:5, esv)

This is a clear image of the Messiah, the Savior of the world who was called the Lion of Judah. He was from the lineage or the root of David, known as one of the greatest kings of Israel. Jesus the Messiah is worthy. But it was not his lineage that made him worthy, but the fact that he had triumphed. He had won the victory. He had conquered. He had overcome the world. And we are reminded of his words in John 16 verse 33:

"In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33, nrsv)

There was a lamb standing as though it had been slain. This stands in contrast to the picture of the victorious warrior-like Messiah that many of the Jewish people had been expecting would conquer the world. Jesus has conquered the world through his suffering servanthood. Just as a lamb was led to be slaughtered during Old Testament Jewish worship, so Jesus conquered the world, conquered sin and death through his suffering and death for us. The Lamb remains humble in silence throughout the book of Revelation.

Jesus redefines the meaning of power and conquest in his victory through sacrifice. A Lamb is standing in the presence of the throne, representing both his resurrection and his deity. The Lamb has seven horns, symbolizing power in the Old Testament, and seven the symbol of... complete power. With seven eyes, eyes being the symbol of knowledge and awareness. And seven the symbol of...completeness, with divine omniscience, with divine omnipresence, all knowledge, all presence, these eyes are being described as being the seven spirits of God, the complete spirit of God, the all present spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the comforter, the one who goes before us, through whom we have strength.

So the Lamb takes the scroll and the throne room of heaven rejoices. The creatures and elders fall down before the Lamb, giving the same worship to the Lamb as they did to the one on the throne. There is music, there is prayer that fills the throne room like incense and

they sing a new song. “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God and they shall reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:9, esv) A new song is sung. It’s something different and miraculous that has been accomplished by Christ. This celebrates the beginning of a new creation that happens through Christ. He has ransomed people for God through his blood. This is a picture of first century slaves being freed for a price. This ransom is not just for the first century, but for all people throughout all time. Salvation is for all to be kings and priests, to reign, to have power. This is a message of hope to those living under the Roman Empire.

Another scene of heavenly worship is being set for us in verse 11 with sights and sounds. Added to the creatures and the elders are the angels. In a translation you are reading the author could have said myriads of angels or millions of angels. When we look at the original language, the original Greek, he uses the number ten thousand, which to us doesn’t seem to be a lot. But ten thousand was the largest word they had for numbers. They didn’t have a word for anything larger than ten thousand. And to say ten thousand times ten thousand would be the largest amount that they could imagine, it’s beyond calculation. And this uncountable, unknowable number of angels was saved in verse 12.

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:12, niv)

The Lamb is worthy because he was slain. He is worthy to receive power and strength, the Almighty strength, the Sovereignty of God, worthy to receive wealth. Wealth is related to kingship throughout Revelation. Wisdom, in the Old Testament, is the gift from God to kings. Wisdom is attributed to God, coming from God. Honor, the respect given to a person of worth, glory and praise. These are things only to be given to God: power, wealth, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and praise. The praise of the angels is sevenfold. Their praise is complete. Their praise is true. Their praise is perfect, every creature in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and in the sea. This is the final scene of worship in this passage and it is being set for us. Worship is not limited to one type of creature. All of creation, everywhere, will worship God, who says, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, blessing and honor and glory and power forever and ever.” (Revelation 5:13) The universal praise of all creatures will never end. It will last forever and ever. The Lamb, the Christ, Jesus, is exalted and given the same as the One seated on the throne, the Creator, part of the incomprehensible nature of God. God the Father, Creator, and God the Son, the Lamb who was slain are worshipped. And God the Spirit, the seven spirits, the complete spirit, the Holy Spirit is the very presence of God in the throne room providing us access to the throne. And these four living creatures said, “Amen”. We get this from the Jewish tradition of worship and it’s a combination of praise and it’s a statement of unity and it’s something we use here in our worship. Amen!

And so the elders represent the appropriate response. They fall down and worship. So what is our response to the heavenly scene that has been set before us? At the center of it all is the Lamb, Jesus.

Those of you here today who have experienced his saving love and grace, I challenge you to continue to grow and learn from prayer. The Bible, read the Gospels again and again, again and again. Through mentoring and teaching others, through serving others. Remember his example as the Suffering Servant. Through serving others, you will grow closer to him, through guiding others into a relationship with Jesus. When you do this you grow and learn more about Jesus as you see his grace and his freedom and hope at work in others.

Now those of you who have not experienced his saving love and grace, maybe you have not entered into a relationship with him and you have not cast down your crown and given him the proper authority and place in your life. You can begin this new journey with him today. There is no magical formula, there are no magical words, only believe he is what he says he is. Trust that the salvation and freedom he has brought to the world is for you too. Begin your life as a new creation.

Today we have heard a message of hope. Jesus has conquered the world. He has brought freedom to us all. Our response is to accept him. Accept his grace and worship him. In all of his power, in all of his wealth, in all of his wisdom, in all of his strength, in all of his honor, giving him glory and praise – let us respond to him today in worship.