

Lesson 2: Revelation 4-5.

Opening Prayer: Mighty God, thank you for being with us through every storm in our lives. Jesus, as we immerse ourselves in the revelation that you gave to John, may we be reminded that while you are as powerful as a lion, you chose to sacrifice yourself as a lamb so that our sins can be forgiven. Thank you for the gift of life. Amen!

[Feel free to skip to “The Scroll and the Lamb” below (Revelation 5) if time is limited.]

Read aloud Revelation 4:1-11

According to Wright, “Chapter 4 is where the story really starts. This is where John is given the ‘revelation’ that gives the book its title. Everything from this point on is part of the vision which is granted to him as he stands there in the heavenly throne room” (42).

Read aloud Wright’s explanation of the “sevens.”

It may help us to keep our balance in the rich mixture of imagery in the following chapters if we see the book like this, structured around its sequences of ‘sevens’. We have already had the seven letters to the churches. Now we are to be introduced to the seven seals, which are opened between 6.1 and 8.1. The seventh introduces a further sequence, the seven trumpets, which are blown one by one from 8.6 to 11.15. Then, at the center of the book, we find visions which unveil the ultimate source of evil and its chief agents: the Dragon, the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land – and also a vision of those who have somehow defeated these monsters (chapters 12–15). This then leads into the final sequence of seven: the seven bowls of God’s wrath, the final plagues which, like the plagues of Egypt (15.1), will be the means of judging the great tyrannical power and rescuing God’s people from its claws. These bowls of wrath are poured out in chapter 16, but their effect is described more fully in chapters 17 and 18, leading to the celebration of victory over the two Beasts in chapter 19. That only leaves the old Dragon himself, and the last twists of his fate are described in chapter 20. This then clears the stage for the final unveiling of God’s eventual plan: the New Jerusalem in which heaven and earth are joined fully and forever.

What we are witnessing in chapters 4 and 5, then, is not the final stage in God’s purposes. This is not a vision of the ultimate ‘heaven’, seen as the final resting place of God’s people. It is, rather, the admission of John into ‘heaven’ *as it is at the moment*. The scene in the heavenly throne room is the present reality; the vision John is given while he is there is a multiple vision of ‘what must take place after these things’ – not ‘the end of the world’ as such, but those terrible events which were going to engulf the world and cause all the suffering for God’s people about which the seven churches have just been so thoroughly warned.

John is summoned into the throne room because, like some of the ancient Israelite prophets, he is privileged to stand in God's council chamber and hear what is going on in order then to report it to his people back on earth. Like Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22, he sees God himself sitting on his throne, with his hosts around him, and is privy to their discussions and plans. But this scene reminds us, too, of Ezekiel 1, where the prophet is given a vision of God's throne-chariot, carried to and fro on whirling, fiery wheels. The rainbow (verse 3) reminds us of that, but also takes us back to the story of Noah in Genesis 9, where the great bow in the sky was God's visible promise of mercy, never again to destroy the earth with a flood. A 'rainbow looking like an emerald' is a challenge to the imagination – not the only such challenge in these chapters, as we shall see! – but the effect is a rich and dense combination of mercy, awe and beauty (43-44).

While we think of Revelation as an unusual book, it's good to be reminded that other people have also been invited into particular "revelations" from God that are recorded throughout scripture (e.g. 1 Kings 22 and Ezekiel 1).

Remember the big theme of Revelation? *Jesus is Lord, and he has won, is winning, and will win.* With that in mind, Wright says,

"I have spoken of this scene so far in terms of God's throne in heaven, and John's appearing before it like an Old Testament prophet. But the idea of a throne room, with someone sitting on the throne surrounded by senior counsellors, would instantly remind John's readers of a very different court: that of Caesar. We have already heard hints of the power struggle (the kingdom of God against the kingdoms of the world) in the opening three chapters. Now, by strong implication, we are being invited to see that the powers of the world are simply parodies, cheap imitation copies, of the one Power who really and truly rules in heaven and on earth.

As John's great vision unfolds, we will see how it is that these human kingdoms have acquired their wicked, cruel power, and how it is that God's radically different sort of power will win the victory over them. This is the victory in which the seven letters were urging the churches to claim their share. We now discover how that victory comes about. It begins with the unveiling of reality. Behind the complex and messy confusions of church life in ancient Turkey; behind the challenges of the fade synagogues and the threatening rulers; behind the ambiguous struggles and difficulties of ordinary Christians – there stands the heavenly throne room in which the world's creator and lord remains sovereign. Only by stopping on our tracks and contemplating this vision can we begin to glimpse the reality which not only makes sense of our own realities but enables us, too, to win the victory" (45-46).

Optional Discussion Question:

1. Do you long to be in the throne room of heaven someday? Why or why not?

The Scroll and the Lamb

Read aloud Revelation 5.

Wright says: “God, the creator, has a scroll in his right hand like an architect with a rolled-up design for a building, or a general with a rolled-up plan of a campaign. The scroll is sealed with seven seals. We rightly guess, however, that it contains God’s secret plan to undo and overthrow the world-destroying projects that have already gained so much ground, and to plant and nurture instead the world-rescuing project which will get creation itself back on track in the right direction. Is there anybody out there who deserves to open this scroll? Is there anybody who has not, themselves, contributed in some way to the problems of creation, to the age-old spoiling and trashing of God’s beautiful world? John’s answer shows that he, like the other New Testament writers, had a realistic view of the deep-rooted problem of all the human race – and, it seems, all other creatures as well (verse 3). Nobody deserves to open the scroll” (51-52).

God’s original plan was to work through the obedience of humankind. But Adam failed, Eve failed, Israel failed... This is a tragedy. This is why John weeps.

Wright says: “We might well join John in floods of tears at this point. Can nothing be done? But already the plan, to wipe away all tears from all eyes (7.17; 21.4) has begun. ‘Don’t cry,’ says one of the elders. ‘Look!’ he says. ‘Here is the one who can do it.’ And before we even look we know who this is. It is the truly human one. It is the true Israelite. It is the Messiah” (53).

Optional Discussion Questions:

Wright differentiates between “lion Christians” and “lamb Christians.”

1. How do you see each kind of Christian playing out in our engagement with culture, politics, or moral issues today?
2. How do you see the lion and the lamb styles playing out in your own life?

Note: for the rest of the book of Revelation, Jesus is a lamb, not a lion.

Wright says: “The first song, then, praises the lamb for rescuing a people by his death so that they could then take forward God’s royal and redemptive purposes (‘kingdom and priests’) for the wider world. The second song, in which thousands upon thousands of angels join, turns from what the lamb has *achieved* to what he has *deserved*, namely, all the honour and glory of which creation is capable. The wealth and strength of the nations belongs to him; everything that ennobles and enriches human life, everything that enables people to live wisely, to enjoy and celebrate the goodness of God’s world – all this is to be laid at his feet. Sadly, there are

many Christian who think of Jesus purely in terms of their own comfort and hope ('he has rescued us; he is with us as a friend') and who fail completely to see the sheer scope of his majesty, the sweep of his glory. Many rest content to have Jesus around the place for particular 'spiritual' purposes, but continue to assign riches, power, glory and the rest to early forces and rulers. Perhaps one of the reasons why Revelation is marginalized in some churches is precisely because it so strongly challenges this attitude" (57-58).

Optional Discussion Questions:

1. How does or how can our worship (call to worship, greeting, music, prayers, sermons, offerings, blessings) capture both the intimacy of a relationship with Jesus and the "sheer scope of his majesty"?
2. How could your prayer life be affected by knowing that the prayers of the saints are held in golden bowls like incense in the throne room of God?

Closing Prayer (read aloud, if possible):

Worthy are you, Jesus the slaughtered lamb, to receive our power and our wealth and our wisdom and our might and our honor and our glory and our blessing. Forgive us when we try to hold on to these things for ourselves, convinced that our worth and our victory lies in them, and not in you. Call us to kingdom living, sharing in your work as the royal priesthood, bringing our praises to you and bringing your rule to the world.

Along with the four living creatures, we say, "Amen!"