

# St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups March 7<sup>th</sup> 2010

## Past Imperfect Future Tense! A vision of Heaven - Rev 4: 1-11



### Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

Last week we concluded the seventh of the seven letters John wrote to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Packed with advice on everyday life of faith for very diverse communities, chapters 1-3 are however, in one sense, just an introduction to John's sermon proper which begins at chapter 4. In Chapters 4 and 5 John switches from the immediate concerns of the church on earth to a vision of heaven and he takes his readers on an emotional journey as they are moved from awe, worship and wonder (chapter 4) to one of grief and despair (5:4) and then to one of relief and praise (5:6-14).

This week we journey with John into 'The Throne room of Heaven' (chp 4) but before doing so we need to remind ourselves about the character of Apocalyptic literature to which much of Revelation belongs. Revelation is a mix of different forms of writing – epistle, prophecy and apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature was a form of writing that flourished in the first century AD and in the times of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah. Characterised by a background of persecution, use of visions, pictures, numbers and Old Testament References, Apocalyptic Literature has many dangers! One of the biggest is the temptation to interpret each description and symbol historically or literally which can lead us to a completely different understanding to that which John intended. For example reading John's description of Jesus in 1:12-16 you can get a taste of a majestic, glorious, awe inspiring understanding of Jesus but to picture Jesus literally with a sword coming out of his mouth can be unhelpful to say the least! John uses words to try and convey something more than that than can be conveyed through word and symbol. This is true of his description of the throne room of heaven. If we tried to literally recreate the description in chapter 4 we may end up with a glorified celestial version of Disney Land! John is a 'word artist' – and his descriptions in Revelation are not photos of the future but rather an abstract painting! The power of Revelation is not in the interpretation of individual symbols – each brush stroke – but the overall impact of the picture painted for us.

So to the throne room of heaven - what is it that John sees? read 4:1-11. John's vision of heaven is detailed and specific with rainbows, thrones, crowns, a sea of glass and fantastic creatures but what he is describing is not so much a place where we might go when we die as the characteristics of God and what it must be like to live in his presence – the one who is the source and centre of all things. In Chapter 4 John is describing three main attributes of God – His sovereignty, His majesty and His holiness.

**God's Sovereignty** – read 4:1-2. Being a Christian at the time John was writing was difficult. The might and majesty of Rome was all pervasive and there were tough times ahead for the Church. In this context John affirms the truth throughout Revelation that God is ultimately in charge. There is a spiritual reality which paints a different picture to the one immediately observable and to those who lived under the shadow of Caesar's throne. The one truth that matters above all else is that there is a greater throne - the throne inhabited by God (4:2-3) - John's uses the term 'throne' 47 times during the course of Revelation! God is in control. His plans and purposes which are a heavenly reality will become an earthly reality as well – read chp 11:15 but for the moment John lingers in the throne room and is simply content to gaze lost in wonder love and praise at his sovereign God.

**God's Majesty** - read 4: 3-6. Notice John never describes God himself but uses suggestion and symbolism to convey God's majesty: jasper and carnelian – precious stones, a rainbow the colour of emeralds reminding us of God's covenant, elders representing the worship of heaven of which that on earth is at best a copy, white clothing the colour of triumph.

**God's Holiness** – read v 6–8. Verse 6 paints a picture of a sea of glass which points to the holiness and separateness of God. The four living creatures include references to an eagle, bull, lion and man and are meant to represent the whole of creation; they lead in the worship of heaven in never ending singing "Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God almighty, who was and is to come." Real power is not evil but lies with the God who is holy and this is no passing phase for God is He who was, is and is to come. God's power and eternal being ensure his holiness will triumph over evil and so the response in heaven to this Sovereign, Majestic and Holy God is one of unbridled worship – read v 9 – 11.

John in chapter 4 has a glimpse of God - his vision of heaven, points us to a one and only right response which is worship. A God centred life or a self centred life is John's challenge The title of today's study is 'A vision of heaven' but what we have ended up with is a vision of God which is as it should be. In reality heaven is not "pie in the sky by and by" but life now, not yet and always in the presence of God who is the source and centre of all things, a God who invites us to worship. Our response is crucial. *"Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are in turn alarmed by spectres and soothed by placebos. If there is no center there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose."* (Eugene Peterson - Reversed Thunder).



**Witness: Before discussion, read the Bible passage and ask God to help you discern what the Spirit wants to say to your group. Make sure there's plenty of room for prayer and ministry.**

1. What was the most significant worship experience you have ever had and what made it so special? How does your experience compare to the adoration of the elders and creatures?
2. John says he was 'in the Spirit' as he saw this vision. What do you think that means and is that an experience we might have too?
3. Whenever worship is offered in this chapter the worshippers fall down. What might this teach us about our own attitudes to worship?
4. How do you worship God in your everyday life? How can we offer our body (bodily life) to God as a "living sacrifice" and a "spiritual act of worship" Romans 12:1-2
5. Discuss Eugene Peterson's comment on the failure to worship.