

The letters to the seven churches are now finished, and Revelation starts what is the main part of the book. Jesus says in verse 1 of our reading: "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." So what we have, then, is the beginning of the visions of what is to come, the visions of what must take place in the future. And honestly, Christians, it is exactly this that makes so many Christians feel anxious and worried. Because the future seems so dark to us. The future can seem so terrifying. And very often the pictures that Revelation uses to describe the future make it worse. It gets to the point where maybe we don't even want to know what's going to happen. We don't even want to look into the future, because we think that that way we can deal with it. If we just ignore it, if we just let it go, we'll be able to face whatever may come.

But Christians, the reason for this anxiety is because we are looking at the future in the wrong way. In other words, we have our eyes focused on the wrong thing. And when we don't have our eyes fixed on the right thing, the future will seem terrifying. It will seem rather dark, because then all we will see is the evil and disaster after disaster. And honestly, who wants to live in that kind of a future? But when we have our eyes focused on the right thing, when we are looking where we should be looking, then everything else will make sense. Then the world will not be so terrifying. And this is exactly what Revelation chapter 4 and Revelation chapter 5 are meant to do: to show us what to look at, to show us where we need to keep our eyes fixed.

And so it's no accident, then, that the first thing that John sees when he sees the vision of heaven is a throne. Verse 2 says: "At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne." A throne, of course, is a symbol of authority, because it's the place where the king sits. And this particular throne is God's throne in heaven, his place of authority. And pay attention, Christians, that this throne, especially in the later verses, is described as being in the very center of heaven, in the very middle of everything. Everything else is described as being around the throne, as being in a circle around it. It's like the bullseye on a dartboard. God's throne is in the very middle, and everything else comes out from it.

And what this shows us, Christians, is that nothing happens apart from God. Everything is in God's control. God is in the midst of it all. God is in absolute control of everything that happens in his creation. And when we remember that, when we keep our eyes fixed on God in this way, it helps us to see the future rightly, because then we will know that no star falls from heaven apart from God causing it to fall. No hair will fall from your head apart from the will of your heavenly Father. Nothing happens apart from God, and nothing goes on any longer than God allows it to go on. If we have to drink a bitter cup, Christians, yes, God gave it to us, but God will also bring it to an end. So then, when we are faced with the future, when we are faced with evil, when we have to even deal with our suffering because of it, we can know that God is King over all. And our King commands all things in heaven and on earth. So why then should we be afraid? Our king commands our future. Why then should we fear?

But John also goes on to describe God as he sits on his throne. He says in verse 3: "And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald." You'll notice here that John's not actually using any specific details. He's not telling us exactly what he saw. Rather, he is giving us the impression of what he saw, and he uses gemstones to talk about that impression. Jasper in those days could really refer to just about any kind of precious stone. It didn't necessarily mean one thing in particular. But carnelian, on the other hand, was typically a red-colored stone. But the point is not the particular

stones or the particular color. The point is the general impression that they make. Because we all know how beautiful gemstones can be. There are few things more beautiful than seeing a gemstone sparkling in the light, to see it as it shines as we turn and as we look at it. There's few things more beautiful than a well-cut diamond, the way that it reflects the light and is always catching our eye. We know how beautiful gemstones can be. But Christians, if gemstones are so beautiful, how much more so the one who made them? All of the gemstones of this world will seem like just rocks in comparison to the glory of God. And so we see, then, that nothing in this world is like him. He is over all things. He is our true treasure. He is our dearest desire, and nothing can compare with him.

But John also describes a green rainbow that goes around the throne of God. And the word for "rainbow" in Greek, which is the language that Revelation was first written in, is "iris," like the iris of an eye. So in other words, the rainbow here is like an iris surrounding a pupil, the pupil being the throne of God. But this tells us something about who God is, because a rainbow points back to the promise that God made to Noah after the flood, when he promised that he would never flood the world again, that he would never destroy it in that way. And God kept that promise. God will always keep that promise, because he will do what he says he's going to do. And it's green because it's also like some of the gemstones which were on the garments of the high priest in the Old Testament, especially the stones on which the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were written. And the names were written on those stones to show that God always remembered them, that they were always before him as the high priest carried out his work. So this green rainbow, then, is not only a symbol of the glory of God, but it's also a symbol of his faithfulness. He is steadfast. He is true, keeping his promises from generation to generation. And when we remember that, Christians, why then should we fear what is to come? Do we think that God is going to somehow forget his promises, just because things have gotten hard, just because things seem to be getting worse all the time? Never. God will never forget his promises. God will always do what he says he's going to do, because the God who commands all things is also faithful to his people forever. Why then should we be afraid?

But John goes on to describe more about God when he says in verses 5 and 6: "From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal." So the lightning and the rumblings and the thunder here show the presence of God. It's just like on Mount Sinai. When God came down on that mountain to give the Ten Commandments to Moses, there was also thunder and lightning on that day. These things are symbols of his power, symbols of his glory, symbols of his majesty as he sits there enthroned in heaven. And if we tremble at the sound of a particularly loud clap of thunder here on earth, how much more will we tremble before the God of all things? God indeed is in his holy temple! Let all keep silence before him.

The seven torches here are a symbol of the Holy Spirit, the seven spirits of God being the Holy Spirit, as we heard in Revelation chapter 1. But John also describes what he calls a great sea before the throne of God. And that shows the power of God at work. The reason for that, Christians, is because in the Old Testament the sea was always seen as something terrifying. It was always seen as something destructive, because it's always unstable. It's always moving around. It's always threatening to overwhelm. In fact, the great flood of Noah is described as if the sea came up and completely washed over the land. That's how the sea is depicted in the Old

Testament. So then, it becomes a symbol of chaos, even a symbol of evil, threatening to destroy everything that God has made. But this sea is described as being perfectly still. Not even a ripple or a wave on it, like a sheet of glass, like crystal. If you've ever seen water that still before, you'll know exactly what John is talking about. But that shows the power of God, Christians, because God also commands the sea. He gives the command, and it is perfectly still. And he commands the wind and the waves, and they obey him. And the same God who commands the sea to be still is the God who commands your future. Why then should we be afraid?

So how should we respond to all of this? What is the most natural reaction to this vision of God? To fall down in worship before him. Because God is indeed worthy of all of our worship, Christians. God is indeed worthy of all of our adoration, of all of our praise. Not only because of what he has done--though he certainly deserves it for that reason too--but first and foremost because of who he is as God. And we see this through the creatures that John also sees in heaven with God. Because he describes what he says are twenty-four thrones surrounding the throne of God, with twenty-four elders seated on those thrones. And these elders are also symbols of the whole Church of God, because twelve is always a number of the Church. Think of the twelve tribes of Israel or the twelve apostles, and so forth. And twelve plus twelve, twenty-four, is a picture of the whole Church, the Old Testament and the New Testament together. And they are joined in the worship of God. And the four living creatures here surround the throne of God, and they also represent the whole creation. Four is a number of completion, like the four directions or the four winds or the four corners of the earth. And the creatures are described like creatures: an eagle, an ox, a lion, and the face of a man. They look like God's creation.

Now, they are also real things. They're not just symbols, but they also represent more than just themselves. But pay attention to what it is that they are doing, because that's the most important thing. They are worshiping God. Day and night without ceasing they are worshiping him because of who he is. The four living creatures cry out with a loud voice: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" They are worshiping him because of who he is: the all-holy God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who is over all things, who commands all things, and to whom all things belong. And the twenty-four elders cast down their crowns before God as a way of showing their submission to him, as a way of showing that they owe everything to him. And they also cry out with a loud voice in verse 11: "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." And they show us, Christians, that God indeed is worthy. God indeed is the Lord. And it is right to worship him here on earth also as we gather together on this day.

But this shows us in one last detail, Christians, how we should also look at the future. Because the song of the elders begins by saying: "Worthy are you, our Lord and God." And that's significant because that phrase was not only used for God in the days when the book of Revelation was written. The Romans also used it in their worship of the Roman emperor. They would say, "Worthy are you, Caesar, to receive all of these things," either when he was coming into a city or when they were simply worshiping him in one of their many temples. And some of the emperors insisted on being called Lord and God. That's how they wanted people to look at them. But the elders show us the truth: God alone is worthy. God alone is our Lord and God. No matter how much the world tries to tell us otherwise, this truth always remains. And when we come together to worship the Lord as our Lord and God, we are saying to the world that he alone

is worthy. He alone rules all things. He alone commands all of our ways. God is the Lord, and there is no other. Not Caesar, not kings, not presidents, not governments, not anything. God alone is worthy. He alone is the Lord. And we worship the Lord who made heaven and earth. There is none like him!

So Christians, as we face the future, let us keep our eyes fixed in the right place. Let us look at God. And when we do that, Christians, everything else will make sense. It will all become clear. And we will be able to face all things that may happen, because our God, who commands all things, who rules over all things, who directs all of our ways, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come! Worship him and him alone, because he is God forever.

Let us pray. Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power. Help us to keep our eyes always fixed on you, so that we may know that you alone commands our ways and that nothing in this world will ever be able to take us away from you; for you live and reign with the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.