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Apocalypse Now?

What does the book of Revelation have to say to us today?

WEEK TWO – 22 June 2025

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Breakdown of contents each week ...

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SESSION TWO – In the Control Room (chapters 1 – 5)

P 4 = Reading – Revelation 1:4-18

⁴ John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

⁷ Look, he is coming with the clouds,
and every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and all peoples on earth will mourn because of him.
So shall it be! Amen.

⁸ 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'

⁹ I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹ which said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.'

¹² I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest. ¹⁴ The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

I SAW HEAVEN OPENED

Chaplain ... Cambridge ... photographer.

... University Control Room ...

I was for ever afterwards aware of being watched wherever I went!

something of that ceaseless surveillance ... letters to the seven churches that they each begin with the Lord saying 'I know'.

Here in CC, at the 8, we use a prayer each week that acknowledges God as one 'unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden.'

theatre or cinema – actors, the script that is being spoken, the scenery and the props.

How easy to forget the significance of the Director ... Yet the Director is responsible ...

'All the world's a stage ...' said Shakespeare.

The Bible would agree, in the sense that human life has a plot.

Human history has a destination.

Not that we are puppets pulled by hidden strings, over which we have no control – far from it! Each one of us has the choice as to what we will make of the character we play.

And yet the bible tells us that God has a role he has designed for each of us – and it is the discovery of that role which gives our life meaning and purpose. It is the discovery of that role which prevents the feeling that we are mere accident of cosmic chance.

Unfortunately, the human race has, for the most part, lost the script.

- We don't know our lines
- We can't see the plot.
- Many even doubt that the Director exists at all

The book of Revelation is perhaps the supreme expression of scripture's insistence that the world has a Director, who is moving according to His purposes, according to His timescale, that there is one who has written the script, and who has sealed the final acts of human history.

In these opening chapters of his Revelation, John is, if you like, taken into the divine Control Room, the cosmic nerve centre – or, if you prefer the theatre analogy, behind the scenes to see the Director's Chair, to meet the leading man, to see the script of the world's future.

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CHAPTER 1 – ONE LIKE A SON OF MAN

- ⇒ purpose (1:1) - 'to show ... what must soon take place'
- ⇒ authorship (1:1,4,9) – simply "John": well known, last surviving apostle
- ⇒ the number 'seven' (52 times) – blessed, churches, spirits = fullness, completeness
- ⇒ descriptions of God the Father & Jesus Christ

What a beautiful description he gives us of God and of Jesus Christ, from verse 4 onwards – 'him who is, and who was, and who is to come', an echo of the divine name given by God to Moses in Exodus, 'I am who I am'. The author of Hebrews describes Jesus as 'the same yesterday, today and forever' (Hebrews 13:8).

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What does Revelation say about Jesus?

1. What God says of himself, Jesus says of himself

'I am the first and the last' (1:17)

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*'This is what the LORD says –
Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty:
I am the first and I am the last;
apart from me there is no God. Isaiah 44:6*

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2. What is said of God in worship, is said of Jesus in worship.

In chapters 19 and 22 an angel rejects worship – but Jesus does not.

Note the close parallels of the hymns in chapters 4 and 5.

Worship of the lamb leads to worship of God and the Lamb together.

Note use of singular, for example in 22.3-4 (also 21.23).

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³ ... *The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.* ⁴ *They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. Revelation 22:3-4*

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3. What God does, Jesus does.

Judging, saving, ruling, being present.

In particular the coming of God is the coming of Jesus

(seven times 'I am coming' – 2.5, 16,3.11, 16.15, 22.6, 12,20)

See how John describes Jesus, in verse 5, as

the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth

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"As a way of stating unambiguously that Jesus Christ belongs to the fullness of the eternal being of God, this surpasses anything in the New Testament" (Richard Bauckham)

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It is this Jesus

who loves us, and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father (1:5)

The phrase 'kingdom and priest' is used in the OT (Exodus 19), to describe the people of God;

⁵ *Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine,*

⁶ *you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."* Exodus 19:5-7

and St Peter uses it in 1 Peter 2:5 & 9 to describe the New Testament people of God.

That is what we are.

I don't know how kingly or priestly you feel as you read this, but the bible says that if you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, then he has made you part of his royal priesthood. If we truly believed that, what would change about our lives today?

In verse 7, John introduces one of the remarkable features of the book of Revelation – we in fact glimpse the end on several occasions throughout the book before we actually arrive at chapters 21 and 22.

~ roller coaster ride? ~

'He is coming with the clouds'

This is what Daniel prophesied, what Zechariah 'saw' with his prophetic sight ...

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. Zechariah 12:10

... and what Jesus told us will happen.

Even those who pierced him will see. The nations of the earth will mourn.

What a day it will be when we see the Lord coming on the clouds of glory. We can't possibly imagine it. Maybe, like me, you are praying that it might be in our day, that you and I might see that. What a day it will be! We don't know when it will be, we don't make any foolish predictions; but we long for that day when we see him coming.

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Then the Lord himself speaks (1:8) "'I am the Alpha and the Omega", says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come'

In 1:17 Jesus says 'I am the first and the last ...

- Alpha & Omega = the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet
- First (protos) & last (eschatos)

signalling one who holds everything together, encompasses all that is.

How would these words have been received by the members of those seven churches, in modern, western Turkey, Ephesus, Smyrna, and the rest?

Christians were already finding that holding the faith was hard. They faced a materialistic and consumer-driven society; they lived among people who were constantly waiting for the latest robes, the latest perfumes, the latest spices, the latest luxuries to come by trade.

They faced a maze of competing spiritualities, world views, philosophies, religions, faiths.

They lived in a world where sexual decadence was just the tip of an iceberg of almost unrestrained moral corruption.

And they faced pressure from the authorities to conform to the practice of Emperor worship.

And this pressure was rapidly turning into persecution for Christians who refused to bow the knee to Caesar.

Persecuted church today ...

Not too dissimilar to today then – we live in a consumer-mad society, the competing world-views and spiritualities knocking on our doors daily, a society which is morally bankrupt ...

And maybe we, like John's first readers, are tempted to say 'Where is God? Why does evil seem so rampant? Why do the forces of darkness seem so triumphant? Where is the vindication promised by God?

Where is history going? Is it going anywhere? Is God ever going to act?' Do you ever feel like that when you watch the news and you see carnage in so many different parts of the world? When is God going to act?

Note that John is right there with his readers, in 1:9 - 'I John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.'

John knows only too well what they face. In fact they are missing his leadership and his presence at this precise moment, *because* he is exiled on the Roman penal colony of Patmos, because of his refusal to compromise his faith.

And all this happens on the Lord's Day. You may assume that this is a reference to Sunday. The early Church didn't use this phrase for Sunday for a couple of hundred years – used to call that the first day of the week (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John for Easter Day / Acts 20:7).

This is the only occurrence of the phrase in the New Testament, so it is not a reference to Sunday.

In fact, it may well refer to the one day in the year when the Emperor was to be worshipped. Incense was to be burnt on the altars of all the temples, and the people were required to engage in a special liturgy of worship to the Emperor: 'My Lord and my God.' (cf Thomas in John 20)

And it is on **that very day** that the Revelation of God's sovereignty breaks in and a loud voice, like a trumpet, says 'Write what you see'.

John turns around 'to see the voice that was speaking'. There follows a description of Jesus Christ in all his risen, ascended glory. It is important to note three things about the symbolism used by John as he gazes upon the Son of Man

1

he is attempting not so much to describe geography or time or place, but rather the emotional impact of the experience he is having. We mustn't expect always to be able to explain and interpret every last little bit of this book. Think of it, if you will, rather as a gallery hung with impressionist paintings, rather than a photographic record presented to a Coroner.

2

John is drawing on a fund of apocalyptic imagery, from the Old Testament – Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, from the apocryphal books of Ezra and so on. It seems that John is deliberately interpreting his vision into apocalyptic conventions, so that his readers would understand what he is saying.

John here sees someone like a Son of Man – Daniel 7 ...

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the Messiah, the Promised One, the one beloved of the Prophets, the one who is and will be King of all.

He is wearing a robe that goes right down to his feet; and instantly their minds would have been drawn to the High Priest's robe (Exodus 28, 29).

And yet, he is also described, in verse 14, as like the Ancient of Days in Daniel – ‘His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire’. If you go back to Daniel 7:9-10, you will find that that is the description of God, the Father.

John fuses the imagery of the Old Testament, in order to present the majesty of the risen Christ.

We read in verse 16 that he has a double-edged sword coming out of his mouth and we think of the sword of judgement in Isaiah 49, or in Hebrews, ‘the word of God is a living sword, sharper than any other, piercing to the divide of soul and spirit’.

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No wonder that John’s response to this overwhelming vision is physical as well as emotional – he falls at Jesus’ feet ‘as though dead’.

John has an experience which would have been entirely familiar to the prophets of old. There is something about the sheer majesty of the Lord that makes it hard to remain standing up.

Here, we are told, as we are throughout Scripture, that a perfectly proper response to an encounter with God is to fall over. It has always baffled me that people falling down before the presence of the Lord is so maligned in some sections of the church.

I can understand the Press not liking it much, although it is rather amusing that they refer to the ‘strange **practice**’ of falling over. I mean, how much practice does falling over take? It seems to me it’s the sort of liturgical practice that most of us can get right the first time.

The biblical witness is that falling over in the presence of God is quite normal. I can’t help wondering how the Old Testament Prophets would cope with pews.

One of the things that makes us quintessentially human is that somewhere inside us, there is a desperate urge to know the truth. The Christian faith centres around a person who is the Truth. When we encounter the Truth, when we are met by the Truth, when we are grasped by the Truth, the only proper response is to bow the knee before him in loving adoration and obedience.

How often does our church worship lead us into that place where we can barely stand in God’s presence?

Then, in the midst of this majestic vision of Christ, there is the human touch of Jesus, in verse 17, in response to John’s collapse. Jesus places his right hand on John and says ‘Do not be afraid’.

Do you remember the Mount of Transfiguration? Peter, James and John have gone up the mountain with Jesus, and they are overawed by the transformation that comes upon Jesus, as he shines with a blinding glory, and Moses and Elijah appear beside him; and they fall down and it is at that point that Jesus comes and touches them – how beautifully human, how movingly compassionate is our Lord.

‘I am the first and the last ...

I AM ... the Old Testament title for God = Yahweh

‘I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades’.

Jesus has achieved total victory over death, which Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 is the final enemy. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we needn’t fear it any more.

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CHAPTERS 2 & 3 – the letters to the Seven Churches

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EPHESUS
SMYRNA
PERGAMUM
THYATIRA
SARDIS
PHILADELPHIA
LAODICEA

Fascinating that there are other letters of Paul now lost ...

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After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.
Colossians 4:16

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each letter begins with the words: ‘To the angel of the church in ... write’ followed by

- a description of Jesus
- words of his approval and/or reproof
- a challenge
- a threat
- a promise

each letter closes with the words: ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’

Handouts ...

PERGAMUM

- Hidden manna contrasts with the idol food which was visible and available in the here and now
- White stone could refer to the civic inscriptions set against the dark granite rock

SARDIS

- The fact that the Christian's name will never be erased from the book of life contrasts with the possibility that it might be erased from the magistrate's book while awaiting the death sentence

LAODICEA

- Lukewarm parallels the city's water supply in contrast with Hieropolis (hot) and Colossae (cold)
- Wealth, eye-salve and white clothes pick up on local banking, ophthalmic and wool trades
- 3:20 contrasts with Roman soldiers being billeted by force

What would Jesus say to our churches today?

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CHAPTERS 4 & 5 – THE THRONE, THE SCROLL AND THE LAMB

Chapters 4 and 5 are taken up with three great symbols – the Lamb, the Scroll and the Throne.

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Or, the Director's Chair, the Missing Script and the Leading Man.

Let's just recap again, because it's important to remember the situation into which John writes – persecution, oppression, temptation, faith being severely tested, things not going well for the Church.

Is the Church going to survive the first century of its existence? Jesus had proclaimed that, with His coming, the Kingdom was drawing near. Jesus had proclaimed that, with His coming, the final act of earth history was beginning to unfold.

Jesus had said that there were dressing rooms ready to receive faithful actors, when they made their final exit.

But many are dying now, some as martyrs at the point of the sword. Can Jesus' words be trusted?

Jesus had said that the devil was no longer to be feared, because the author was determined to write him out of the play altogether. But does the world not tell us that the devil is taking centre stage?

When the Church is tested by persecution, by temptation, by oppression, the one thing it needs above all others is a vision of God's sovereignty – and that's Revelation.

'I saw a door standing open in Heaven' – what a glorious privilege, to look behind the scenes of history.

'Come up here and I will show you'.

These words instantly correct some Christian views of the world as so desperately evil that there is no longer any point trying – the sort of ‘get ye out from among them’ approach.

You may have met Christians who almost look forward with glee to the world’s destruction because the world is so evil we had better get it over with as soon as possible; there is no point in evangelism, no point in social action, there is no point in ecological concerns – let’s just get the fireball going, the quicker the better – because the devil has taken the Throne.

And over against that argument, John says ‘No, because I have seen the Control Room. I have seen the Director’s Chair – and there he is.’

John blends imagery from several Old Testament sources – chiefly two.

the first is Isaiah 6 – that glorious vision which Isaiah receives in the temple. Good King Uzziah has just died, and Isaiah is probably wondering who is going to take the throne now. Who is going to replace good King Uzziah? And suddenly the temple erupts with a vision of God’s glory that is so great that only a little bit of the hem of God’s robe is visible.

the other imagery from which John draws is to be found in Ezekiel 1. Like John, Ezekiel is a servant of God in exile, wandering in despair by the river, yet suddenly engulfed by a sandstorm of God’s glory. You will see the similarities: the thunder, the lightning, the rainbow emerald, the sea of glass, the sapphire, the jasper, the carnelian. The description of the four living creatures is clearly taken from Ezekiel 1. 10.

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Their faces looked like this: each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle.
Ezekiel 1:10

Ezekiel 1:1-4, 22-28

1 *In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the River Kebar, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.*

2 *On the fifth of the month – it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin –* **3** *the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the River Kebar in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the Lord was on him.*

4 *I looked, and I saw a violent storm coming out of the north – an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The centre of the fire looked like glowing metal, **5** and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures ...*

22 *Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked something like a vault, sparkling like crystal, and awesome. **23** Under the vault their wings were stretched out one towards the other, and each had two wings covering its body. **24** When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.*

25 *Then there came a voice from above the vault over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. **26** Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. **27** I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire;*

and brilliant light surrounded him. 28 Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

Additionally, thunder and lightning remind us of the giving of the Law on Sinai.

Yet John also introduces elements that are unique to his own vision – his description of the seven spirits [or sevenfold Spirit] of God, speaks of the fullness of God's power.

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What does Revelation say about the Spirit?

Two phrases: 'the seven Spirits' and 'the Spirit'

- (i) The seven Spirits occurs four times

Compare the four-fold title for the people of the world, which comes seven times

Note there are $7 \times 4 = 28$ occurrences of 'the Lamb'

The seven Spirits are seven lamps on earth (1.23-13) but also before the throne (1.5) and also the seven eyes of the Lamb and its seven horns (5:6)

Importance of seven lamps / eyes in Zechariah 4

the seven eyes of the LORD that range throughout the earth (10)

Role of the seven Spirits is an exposition of Zechariah 4.6: 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.'

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The seven Spirits as the divine power released into the whole world by the victory of Christ's sacrifice are the power of divine truth (Bauckham)

- (ii) The Spirit occurs 14 times, all in the context of the inspiration of John's prophecy.

Seven of these occur in the letters – 'hear what the Spirit says', which is what Jesus says.

But the Spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus

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¹⁰ At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, 'Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus.' Revelation 19:10

... both for prophets within the church, and for the Church as a whole as a prophetic witness to society.

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The role to which Revelation calls all Christians is, in essence, the same as that of prophets: bearing the witness of Jesus, remaining faithful in word and deed to the one true God and his righteousness which can only happen by the power of the Spirit. (Bauckham)

John also sees twenty-four elders each seated on a separate throne ... a symbolic representation of the perfect people of God – the 12 patriarchs of Israel, the 12 apostles of the Church.

But do remember that we are not to be dogmatic here. If we start getting bogged down in our interpretation of who exactly the 24 elders are, we have lost the plot. John is not trying to teach us the geography of Heaven, but to convey the wonder of a vision of a God who sits enthroned above all, ceaselessly adored by countless beings.

We are not meant to argue detail so much as to be struck dumb with awe at the glory of the God we worship.

And the song of Heaven which sings over and over again ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty’ – again God is acclaimed as who was and is and is to come, eternally unchanging.

Make no mistake, says John, this is the Director, this is the God who holds the script, this is the God who knows how all things will be, no matter what events on stage may indicate.

Talking of Hymns ...

- Revelation is unique in including hymns in the text in the way it does.
- What do the hymns do for us as we read through Revelation?
- What does singing do for people? What effect does it have?
- Why do people sing? When does the singing stop?
- Note that the hymns also have a particular role in Revelation – often what John hears explains what he sees

For Christians – whether facing Roman persecution in the first century, or facing the seduction of pluralism in the twenty-first – this isn’t merely some academic point of pietistic devotion, but a powerful, political statement of enormous practical application.

There are political implications of Christian worship – huge implications. Look at 4:10 – what do the elders do as they worship?

They lay their crowns before the throne. That was the act of obeisance, instituted by Alexander the Great and continued by the kings that followed him.

And in verse 11, ‘You are worthy’ is lifted directly from the liturgy of the Emperor worship of Ancient Rome. It is what the people of the Roman Empire, including the Christians living under Rome, were expected to chant, supremely on the Lord’s Day – ‘You are worthy’.

That’s what Christians were supposed to be saying to the Roman Emperor. John’s vision is revealing the falsehood of all human power, the emptiness of human tyranny. Don’t worship them, says John, for the future of the world does not lie in the hands of human rulers.

The petty favours that they might be able to offer you – or even the harsh torture with which they might threaten you – are as nothing compared with what God has in store for those who love him. I can show you a loftier throne, a greater king.

The worship of Heaven is a powerful assertion of human freedom in the face of tyranny.

It is far more powerful than the assassin's bullet or bomb. Christians do not need to assassinate their tyrants, because they are not important enough.

They may lock us up, they may take our lives; but they cannot have our worship, for we have seen Heaven opened, we have seen One sitting on the Throne.

Christian worship is an act of political will, as well as an act of devotion. When we worship – however imperfectly – here on earth, we join the chorus of Heaven in declaring that nobody, and I mean **nobody** – be it democratically elected government, or military regime – has the right to receive what is due to our God.

Do you see how far-reaching our worship is? Do you see how Christian worship challenges the very foundations of human tyranny, and all the regimes that take to themselves the attributes that properly belong to God?

And that is why nearly every political tyranny that this world has ever known has sought to prevent God's people from worshipping.

But wait a moment. As we move into Chapter 5, there seems – even in the throne room – to be a problem.

John sees, in the right hand of the one sitting on the Throne, a scroll.
But there is a question being asked over and over again; and it's a question that cannot be answered (verses 1-3).

We need to understand what this scroll is. We are helped in this, because it appears twice in the Old Testament,

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in Ezekiel chapter 2 and Zechariah chapter 5 – a scroll with writing on both sides (quite specific), and Ezekiel tells us that the contents are lament, mourning and woe.

In other words, the scroll that is held in the right hand of him who sits on the Throne is a scroll of judgment.

But we also encounter it later in Revelation when we read that it is the Book of Life, and that it belongs to the Lamb who was slain – bringing us right back here into chapter 5.

And so it is also the scroll of destiny, it is the scroll upon which is written the final details of our planet's existence. It contains the cast list, those who will take their bow at the final curtain.

The Scroll then is the scroll of destiny, the scroll of judgment, the scroll which unfolds the final stages of Planet Earth.

This, then, is the missing script – God’s plan to judge the world, to redeem his people, to consummate history is all here.

And yet the extraordinary thing is that it is secret, it is sealed; and nobody can be found to break the seals.

No one can be found to open it, nor even risk a peep inside.

What an astonishing thought that God’s final purposes cannot be brought to be, that God’s judgment cannot be executed. It’s like a huge ocean liner held under wraps for want of somebody to cut the ribbon.

The whole of human history’s future hangs in the balance, whilst this question reverberates around Heaven. Who is worthy?

And John weeps. He weeps and he weeps and he weeps. It seems to me that John’s tears symbolize the agony of the human condition, because all of us, deep down somewhere, know that we are meant to be in a play with meaning.

Each of us, deep down, will know that our life is supposed to have purpose. We talk about progress precisely because this is what our spirits tell us – that we are going somewhere, that we are supposed to be getting better, improving.

And yet, the tragedy of the human condition is that we just cannot achieve it. Progress remains a tantalizing dream that haunts our sleep and yet remains just out of touch.

So John’s tears, it seems to me, echo the agony of countless millions who feel the frustration and the despair of injustice and evil and depression.

Cannot God do something? Cannot God act? Will God not intervene to wrap everything up? Can God’s judgment be thwarted? Even the angels, even the mighty angel, are asking the question; and until the question is answered the drama of human history remains locked away in the interval before the final act; and all we can do is weep and weep for paradise lost.

But the deadlock is broken when one of the Elders tells John that the Lion of Judah, the Root of David – and all John’s readers would know that these titles mean no one but the Messiah – has triumphed.

Finally, the question in Heaven is answered. The One promised by the Prophets, the Son of David, the Lion of Judah, is able to open the scroll.

And here is one of John’s masterstrokes of symbolism, because when he looks for the Lion, what does he see?

In verse 6, ‘a lamb looking as if it had been slain’.

What a poignant moment. A lamb is weak, harmless, and innocent. It is supremely an animal of sacrifice. And yet, this lamb has seven horns, symbolizing total power, seven eyes symbolizing all-encompassing knowledge – hardly Mary's little lamb, then.

This glorious paradox of victory from suffering, a triumph from failure – the Lion of Judah is a lamb looking as if it were slain.

Remember that right at the beginning of John's gospel, when John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching him at the river Jordan, he calls out, 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' It's easy to gloss over that acclamation, but I think John must have been ashen as he said those words.

Rather than a shout of acclamation, I hear the awe of comprehension, as John realizes, perhaps for the first time, that his own cousin is to become God's ultimate sacrifice – that there will be no last-minute reprieve as there was for Isaac on Mount Moriah; that the world will find the possibility of the forgiveness of sins through the death of the carpenter from Nazareth.

These two chapters emphasize two themes which are central to the whole of the New Testament.

(i) the pivotal significance of the Cross.

Note in 5:9 that, because the Lamb is able to open the seals, Heaven is given a new song. 'You are worthy to take the Scroll'.

Why? Not because the Lamb is the pre-existent Son of God, the agent of Creation or anything like that, even though he is. No, you are worthy because you were slain.

You, the Lamb are worthy because of the Cross, because your blood redeemed people for God.

And this helps to explain one of the deepest mysteries and puzzles of the human situation. On the one hand, we believe that God pre-determines history, that he knows the beginning from the end, as the Prophet Isaiah puts it; and yet, the Bible also insists that history is significant – that what you and I do, at any given point, is significant.

How many of you have not actually felt 'well, if God knows what is going to happen, then why bother going through with this play at all?'

The final act is planned, the elect are chosen, the script is written; but the script is sealed and can only be unsealed by the events which occur within history. The God, who pre-determines all things, has made his own purposes entirely dependent upon one scene in human history.

Everything that God purposed for the world, for redemption, for re-creation, literally hangs on the Cross. If Jesus had said 'no', if Jesus had bottled out, the question 'Who is worthy' would still be going round Heaven today, and you and I would be eternally lost.

It is the blood of Christ that redeems us. The Director, if you like, is keeping everybody in suspense, until the leading man steps onto centre stage – the hero who alone is worthy.

And so only in the aftermath of the Cross, can this question be answered.

Only now can Heaven sing a new song. The world may see the Crucifixion of Christ in many different ways – the execution of a political revolutionary, the tragic end of a very good life.

But Heaven sees the death of Christ as everything. The Cross has changed human history, but it has also changed Heaven; and now human history can finally move to its end.

No expense spared on the cross ...

(ii) the exalted position of Jesus

Where is the Lamb? In the centre of the Throne.

He shares the adoration of the heavenly hosts; the elders now cast their crowns before Him, and sing to Him the song that was sung for the Father.

Nowhere in Scripture is there a more glorious scene than this.

Nowhere in the New Testament is there a clearer statement that Jesus **is** God. Our world has all sorts of views about who Jesus was; the only Jesus Heaven knows is the supreme ruler of all, the Lamb of God, the King of the Universe, the One who is enthroned forever, sitting in the majesty and glory and wonder of Heaven.

John ran out of words – and so do we.

And yet it is this Jesus, gloriously King over the Universe, who offers to be your friend and your companion upon the journey of life. We often say that, in this life, it is not what you know so much as who you know.

Well, that is certainly true of the Christian believer.

Do you know the Lamb of God? Do you know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord?

The book of Revelation, will insist that even now the seals of Earth's final act are being broken, that there can be no more thwarting God's finally acting in glorious judgment upon the world.

The leading man is assembling the entire cast for their final bow – and, as in all good theatre performances, those of us who take part in that final bow will be dressed in more glorious costumes than we have ever worn during the play. The writer to the Hebrews calls those who have joined Jesus in heaven 'the great company of witnesses' – don't you just long to be part of that? Don't you long to take centre stage with Jesus in the final moment of this present Age? The invitation is there – it's offered to all who place their faith and trust in Him.

Just in case someone reading this has not made that commitment to Jesus Christ, it seems fitting to close this session with a prayer of commitment. I invite you to make it your own, if you have not already given your life to Christ.

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Details of next week ...