

Getting Started:

We have said that it's important to bring forward information that we gain from one chapter to the next. So let's pull forward a few thoughts from Ch.'s 1 – 3

Ch.1 – Revelation is a communication from Christ through John to the churches in the province of Asia Minor in AD 95. The churches have been brought to life in Christ by virtue of his death and resurrection. They have been set into ministry exclusively to God's kingdom where they live. And they, like their spiritual brother John, can expect to suffer for the sake of the kingdom for which they must endure. The churches need to remember that one, like the ancient of Days in Daniel, stands among them. They are not to fear what they face in terms of Roman rule and what that means for them spiritually because Jesus has risen from the dead and he holds the keys of death and Hades. Christ commands John to write to the churches in this context about the present and the future.

Ch 2 & 3 – Build on Ch. 1 as letters to each of the seven churches in the province of Asia Minor in address Jesus' (the ancient of days) evaluation of them. Because of the position these churches hold as servants of the living God through Christ, they are each, and collectively, evaluated for how they're living out their call and position in Christ. It's obvious by the tone of these letters that his evaluation the churches fall into one of three categories, conquering, compromising, or caving in. Of the seven two are conquering (and suffering) – Smyrna and Philadelphia; three are compromising (avoiding suffering) – Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis; and two are caving in, Ephesus and Laodicea.

What each church, and the churches collectively, must realize is that Christ alive and returning, and in the meantime, he knows what is going on in each of them. They have a present opportunity to change for the better even though it will increase their suffering. Should they, however, not respond positively to Christ, they face the prospect of judgement in the present and loss of reward in eternity. What can help them move in a direction that will bolster their resolve to remain faithful?

The unveiling of Jesus.

John gives us the subject of the Revelation right in 1:1. The book is the apocalypse or the unveiling of Jesus. From this we should expect that throughout the book we will see Jesus unveiled. Actually the unveiling of Jesus has been happening long before the Revelation. The OT unveils the coming of Jesus in prophecies in Gen 3 and in Isa. to name just two references. From his birth to his death Jesus ministers as God veiled in human flesh. As John 1:14 declares of Jesus,

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

In the gospels Jesus is unveiled as one who ministers as a servant. Matt. 20:28 says that Jesus, did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

After Jesus dies he is resurrected from the dead. This resurrection unveils another great truth about Jesus.

Paul says concerning God's raising of Jesus in Eph.1:19b-22,

These are in accordance with the working of the strength of his (God's) might which he brought about in Christ, when he raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named. Not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Paul unveils Jesus as the absolute Lord over all creation and over his church.

And in Revelation there is yet a further unveiling, perhaps what could be considered Jesus' final unveiling. In Rev 1 Jesus is unveiled as being like the ancient of days in Daniels vision (Dan 7:1-28). John's vision of Jesus is beyond anything we have, to this point seen of him. And yet this is truly who Jesus is.

In Rev. 2 & 3 Jesus is unveiled in his personal intimate connection with each of the 7 churches, and of the 7 churches as a whole. He is among them. This is seen in how portions of the vision from Rev.1 are used to address each church.

The point is that as we move through the course of the Bible we are introduced to Jesus from various points of view. The growing composite picture of all we see concerning Jesus, though, reminds us of just how grand and glorious is Jesus. This is the one we worship, and is most worthy of our worship. But to end is all this information moving us?

Have you ever wondered where creation and history are going? Sometimes it seems like time just marches along without apparent purpose to the whole thing. There is a certain ho-hum sameness to everything.

And for the 7 churches in Asia Minor facing challenge and suffering because of their allegiance to Jesus, I am guessing that there were days when their commitment to faithfulness was tested to the point that they possibly wondered why they were remaining faithful to him. Prolonged suffering can certainly erode our resolve to remain faithful. The writer to the Hebrews makes this point in Heb. 10:34ff. This is possibly why some churches were compromising and even caving in to Roman rule and spiritual ideas.

The Apostle Peter, approx. 26 years before John wrote the Revelation, says this,

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation. (2 Pet. 3:3, 4)

Mockers can have a devastating effect on our faith in Jesus. Their constant taunting can be like water dripping on concrete. In the short term no damage may appear, but over time the constant dripping action can erode the concrete and mar the surface, and go even deeper.

But Peter also reminds his readers (2 Pet. 3:5-7) of an essential fact of God's promise concerning the return of his son,

For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by his word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men.

And then he adds this word of caution to his Christian readers (2 Pet. 3:8, 9),

But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

Peter's admonition is exactly why John writes the apocalypse of Jesus to the 7 churches. Time doesn't just march along with no apparent purpose or end in sight. Those who mock God's word and his promise of return miss an important detail. God's timing is his own. And make no mistake, he is coming back. And God has a plan for all of creation and history. And Jesus is the core of God's plan. This is why John communicated to the 7 churches the things that are, and the things that will take place after these things. (Rev 1:19). Rev. 4 & 5 invite the churches to view God's plan. And his plan starts at his throne.

The Core:

Ch. 4 begins with what seems like an abrupt change in tone and subject. John moves from the letters to the 7 churches to an unbelievably majestic worship scene in heaven. John says he looked and beheld an open door in heaven through which he was invited to enter.

This is hardly the kind of place one would expect to find a prisoner in exile. What catches John's attention first is a vision of the presence of a throne, and someone sitting on the throne whose appearance can only be described in terms of rich and precious gems. And surrounding the one on the throne are twenty four elders clothed in white garments and with gold crowns on their heads. Apparently, there is a ruling council present before the throne.

Some suggest that the 24 elders are made up of two groups, the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 disciples.

Also noticed by John are an array of out of this world images symbolizing sovereignty (thunder/lightning), vision and movement (eyes/wings) all engaged in one unified response to the one on the throne – worship. **Note the content of the worship.**

Like John's vision of Jesus as the ancient of days in Rev 1, the scene unfolding in John's vision in Rev 4 & 5 is also very descriptive, very visual. It's meant to be seen and retained

A word about the rapture:

Many conservative Christians have been steeped in dispensational theology. Part of dispensationalism's interpretational approach is that the church of Jesus Christ will not endure

any of the tribulation that follows from Ch. 6 onward. This called the pretribulation rapture of the church. Many Christians obviously have found great comfort and encouragement in this approach because, let's face it, no one wants to suffer.

Sometime ago I chatted with an individual who's been taught exactly this kind of thinking. He was taught that Ch.'s 6 – 20 are irrelevant for the church because it will not be present during the tribulation. What happens in Ch.'s 6-20 applies exclusively to those left behind and to unrepentant Israel. Only Ch.'s 1-3 and 21-22 apply to the church.

Dispensational theology teaches that John being taken up into heaven at the beginning of Ch.4 is a metaphor of the church also being taken up into heaven ahead of the coming tribulation. If this is the case there are some important questions we must ask of the text. If the church will not be present during any part of the tribulation it seems odd that John omits this critical piece of information in his writing. One would think this too important to leave out. Additionally, nowhere is John ever used as a representative symbol of what happens to the church. John is transported into heaven's precincts, not the church.

Finally, the key text that pretribulation rapturists cling to as connected to Rev. 4 is 1 Thess. 4:13-18. The idea of the dead rising and then believers being caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air and always being with him is what anchors their belief that John in Rev. 4 represents the rapture. What is curious in Paul's discussion in 1 Thess. is that while he most assuredly discusses the fact of living believers being raised following the dead in Christ, he never pegs the "time when" element.

You might be interested to know that the pretribulation rapture doctrine is not as old as you might think. Historical theologians like Bruce Gore have noted that this doctrine found its roots not in the first Century church but through Pastor John N Darby who attended a revival meeting held by Edward Irving at the Powerscourt Conference in England in 1831. In Irving's preaching, he related the ecstatic utterance of a young woman named Margaret McDonald one year earlier in which MacDonald saw the removal of the church through a rapture prior to the great world ending cataclysm to come. Darby heard Irving's stirring recount of McDonald's vision and continued to develop this doctrine.

More recently (1956 onward) a growing number of theologians and commentators have challenged this doctrine. Is the church to be gathered or raptured and always be with the Lord? Resoundingly yes! But it is legitimate to think that Rev. 4 is not the place where this happens? Our study will follow the idea that the entire book of Revelation is written as a single document intended for application to the churches John addresses.

Ch 5

As John sees the wonder of the amazing worship happening around the throne he notices a sealed scroll, or book, in the hand of the one on the throne. There is a question asked, "Who is

worthy to open the book and to break its seals? Something needs to be revealed but the elders seem uncertain as to who can do this as no one can be found.

And John weeps because no one is found to be worthy to open the book and break the seals. One of the elders, though, comforts John saying, stop weeping because someone has been found. That someone has the name Lion of Judah, Root of David. Even more important, he is one who has overcome.

And as John continues to look, he sees a lamb between the throne and the elders, and what is unique is that he is the only one who is able to take hold of the sealed scroll. Note the contrast in image. 5:5 builds our expectation toward that of a lion, but the image John sees here is strikingly different because he sees a meek lamb.

Overcoming is not a matter of power and strength, but submission and death. The lion/lamb was slain. If the churches have been called to “overcome” in their situations, surely the lion/lamb of Judah provides the inspiration and example. Jesus remained resolute in his desire to fulfill the will of his father (lion), but he did not resist those who came up against him and killed him (lamb). He let them do to him what they thought they must, but he remained steadfast in his ministry. This is overcoming.

The vision of this lamb is also unique (seven horns = power/ seven eyes = acutely comprehensive sight). Interesting as well is the fact that in the presence of the lamb are the 24 elders. Each one is holding a harp, and an incense bowl full of the prayers of the saints. **If we think that prayers don't matter, Rev 5:8 suggests otherwise.** What is interesting here is that as the lamb does this, the response of the elders is identical to the response given to the one sitting on the throne – worship. In fact as Ch. 5 comes to a conclusion, the crescendo of praise that has been building from Ch. 4 reaches a climax, and the climax is worship.

Let's pick out the key features presented in Ch. 4 & 5 that give us a clue as to the purpose of these two chapters.

1. A throne. Symbol of authority.
2. One who occupies the throne. Symbol of a ruler.
3. A ruling council. Symbol of unity.
4. Natural and super natural phenomena. Symbol of servanthood
5. Worship. Symbol of the churches true function.
6. A sealed scroll. Symbol of a complete document.
7. A slain lamb that is living. Symbol of a resurrected being.
8. Worship. Symbol of the churches true function.

Making it Real:

What is the function of Ch. 4 & 5 in light of the first three chapters?

How would this glorious vision inspire and encourage the churches?

How would it alter their present behavior?

What's the intended message to the churches?

Craig Keener provides several possibilities

1. God is in charge. How is this theme developed?
2. Invitation to praise. How is this theme developed?
3. The holy God. How is this theme developed?
4. The overcomer. What is the connection with Ch. 2 & 3?
5. The equality of God and the Lamb. Note the development of praise. It is equally given.

Note Keener's concluding remarks, "John's vision encourages Christians in Roman Asia that the worship in the imperial cult is merely a farce, a pale imitation of the true worship in the heavenly court. And in the late first century Christians gained courage to declare that the emperor had no clothes"

"If God's grandeur dwarfs the emperor's majesty, it also challenges in a different way the numbing triteness of modern western culture. God's greatness summons our attention: who are we to be overwhelmed by the mortal emperor, or our present trials? That God is Lord of history and has everything under control helps us view everything else in life the way we should. Praise puts persecution, poverty, and plagues into perspective; God is sovereignly bringing about his purposes, and this world's pains are merely the birth pangs of a new world (Rev 21-22)."

How do Ch. 4 & 5 help us? Hint – opening the door to fellowship (Koinonia/participation) with Jesus opens up new vistas from which to view our life, our challenges, and the world to come.