

## CHAPTER 2

# Beginning in Heaven

As I indicated in the last chapter, most people's fascination with the Book of Revelation comes from the more bizarre and horror-comic kind of images often associated with it. Many people, for instance, are solely concerned with identifying the beast. You may well have someone in your church that thinks she is married to him—and that is a far more immediate problem! However, it is much more important for us to know not who the beast is, but who Jesus is. When we know who Jesus is, when we see Him as He really is, then the things that would cause us disturbance and fear are easily dealt with. When we know Him, what can we fear? If God is for us, who can be against us? God is on our side. God is committed to us. God comes down to us in our most desperate situations. He walks in our furnace to deliver us and bring us into freedom. We saw, in John's vision, a Jesus

who stood in the midst of the lampstands. Jesus is in the middle of His Church, and it is important that before we get into the blood and the horror—for there is some in the Book of Revelation—that we see Jesus at the center of everything. We must get Jesus in our sights if we are to see anything at all from the right perspective. In this chapter, we are going to look at chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, because they belong together, making one glorious episode. I would suggest that you read these chapters before you go any further.

John is going to show us some awful things. He is going to reveal to us seven horrendous plagues and uncover terrible things that break out in our earth after seven trumpets have been blown. He will introduce us to antagonists whose one desire is to overcome and destroy the Church of Jesus Christ. He will show us the conflict in which we are engaged and the enemy that we face. But before he ever takes one step in that direction, before he unveils one principle in the whole area of spiritual warfare, before he gives us one glimpse of the enemy, he takes us up into the Heavens.

As Christians, the Heavens are our natural environment. The Bible tells us that you and I were once dead in trespasses and sins. We were enemies of God, separated from Him by sin. We walked under the influence of “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Eph. 2:2). But God, who is rich in mercy, whose unfailing love is toward us, whose grace is unfathomable, whose arm was not too short to save, reached down into your horrible pit, the slimy mud of your failure, lifted you out, and didn’t just set your feet upon a rock but raised you with Christ and seated you in the Heavenly realms with Jesus! So when John hears a voice that

says "Come up here," we too have heard it. We have responded to it. This is not the church being raptured; this is the redeemed being raised to life in Jesus. This is us recognizing that we are seated with Christ in the Heavenly realms, that these realms are our natural environment.

Notice that in Ephesians 2 the devil is referred to as "the ruler of the kingdom of the air." We were earthbound, and so, in a kind of metaphorical sense, we were *under* him. He had the power of the air, and we were earthbound. But now, in Christ, we are no longer earthbound. Nor are we air-bound. We dwell in the Heavens. Once the devil was over us, but now he is under us. Our home, our citizenship, is in Heaven. It is not just a future hope; it is a present reality. We are God's Heavenly people; we are seated in the Heavens in Christ. Now God wants us to realize that we are seated in the Heavens in Christ for a very simple reason: things look much better from up there!

I will have more to say about this Heavenly perspective later on, but it is important first to note once again that Jesus dwells on the center of all things. John has already seen him on the Island of Patmos, in the center of the church, surrounded by the lampstands. Now, in these two chapters, he shows us Jesus as the focal point, the pivot and the crux of the whole universe. Everything has meaning only as it relates to Jesus. Nothing in the universe can function properly until it relates rightly with Christ. You and I were hopeless and helpless until Jesus came into our lives because, although we searched for our identity, for the meaning of life, for the answers to the age-old questions like "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" none of it is answerable until you meet Jesus. In fact, I have labored so much at the beginning of this book about our need to know Christ for this

simple reason—until you know Christ, you cannot even know yourself.

Jesus called His disciples together one day and asked them what the word out on the street about Him was. What were they saying out there? And there were a number of different replies. If there had been a straw poll, there probably would have been as many different answers as there were people. Everybody has got an opinion about Jesus. Everyone is an expert on what Christianity is. There are people who are unbelievers, pagans, some even lacking any sense of morality, but they think they know what Christianity is all about. It never ceases to amaze me how people out in the world can pontificate about what the church should be doing, and yet they have no interest in God and no idea who Jesus is. But one of the problems we face is that there are also people *in the church* who do not really know who Jesus is. They have bowed the knee and come into the Kingdom, acknowledged Him as Lord and been saved, but they do not really know who He is. They still live in fear of demons, they still live under anxiety about the power of the devil, and they are afraid of what is going on in the world. But if you know who Jesus is, those things will never touch you. It is vitally important that we know who Jesus is!

One day, Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do they say I am?" and there were all kinds of responses. He then asked them, "But who do *you* say I am?" Now we are getting down to the thing that really matters. "But what about you?" He asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by My Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will

build My church, and the gates of hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:15-18).

This is a fantastic statement. “I am going to build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” says Jesus. Death may overcome you, but hell never will! But notice how it works: “You are Christ”; “Yes, and you are Peter.” Peter doesn’t know who he is until he knows who Christ is. He was just Simon, son of Jonah—but now he is Peter. He has a revelation of himself in the light of the revelation he has of Christ. In His light, we see light (Ps. 36:9). We will never know who we are or what God has called us to do until we know who Jesus is. And so unashamedly and without apology, I am spending these opening chapters focusing on Jesus. The Book of Revelation is the book of the revelation of Jesus. And it is a revelation of Jesus that was essential for the first century church. It is also essential for the twenty-first century church so that we can face our world in a way that always leads us in triumph. We need to know who He is so that we can know who we are, and so that we can know what His Church is and what it is here to do.

### *The Standing Lamb*

As you read chapters 4 and 5 in the Book of Revelation, you will notice that there is a kind of repetition all the way through that continually highlights Jesus. We see Him now as the Lamb. There will be more to consider about the Lamb, but let us notice here that it says, “I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing...” (Rev. 5:6). This is an enigma right away. This is a strange, unnatural concept—to see a lamb that had been slain, standing! But this is what God is always communicating to us right through this book—death does not equal defeat, death is

not the end. The Lamb has been slain and yet here He is—standing!

Now notice where He is standing. “I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne” (Rev. 5:6). This is also a strange expression. We would have understood it if it said He was just *sitting* on the throne. It would have spoken volumes about His lordship, His power and authority, His triumph, and His relationship with the Father. If it had said He was sitting *on the edge* of the throne, that could have communicated something of the anticipation of His return.

But it does not say that. It tells us that He is *standing in the center* of the throne; that is because even the throne revolves around Jesus. He is in the center of all God’s purpose. Too many authors have marginalized Jesus in this book and emphasized things that should never have been emphasized. God’s will, as I have stated already, is that, in all things, Jesus should have the preeminence; and here He is even in the center of the throne of God. I do not know what the throne looks like. We get something of a description, but it is all imagery and symbol. We cannot really know what the throne is like, but we know this—Jesus occupies the center place in the throne of God.

#### *Four Living Creatures*

Not only is Jesus in the center of the throne, but the same verse tells us that He is encircled by the four living creatures. These four strange creatures occur occasionally in the Word of God; they are the cherubim that Ezekiel sees actually carrying the throne of Jesus as they pursue his purpose in the world. They are primarily guardians of the throne, and they surround the throne. There are four of them, and four is an important number. We will

look at some numbers as we go through the Book of Revelation together, but four is one of the most important numbers because four speaks of the world. That is why from the Garden of Eden a river arose, and as it flowed out, it broke into four rivers because God's purpose was for the blessing of the garden to flow to the four corners of the earth. That has always been God's will. God wants our whole world turned into a garden. In fact, at the end we find it is a city *and* a garden—a strange combination. God is concerned with our earth, and it is interesting that those closest to His throne are those who dynamically represent His world, because God is not the author of the distance between the world and His throne. It is sin that has opened the gulf, and, as Abraham says to Lazarus, there is "a great chasm" between them (Luke 16:26). There is a chasm, a gulf; but the Book of Revelation, and indeed the whole New Testament, is about how God bridges the gulf between His throne and His world.

Now, these four living creatures are interesting. One looks like a man; we can cope with that. One looks like a calf or a bull; that's a bit of a challenge. One looks like an eagle and one like a lion. In fact, in Ezekiel each of them has four faces. They have a face at the front, a face at the back and a face on both sides. That is why they can go straight ahead whichever way they go. When you have four faces, *everywhere you go* is forward. When you have four faces, you *always* see eye to eye; you cannot help it. But here they are shown in a different guise, and each one of them has one of those faces. The old rabbis used to teach something about this, and I think there is great truth in it. They taught that the bull is the lord of all domesticated animals, the lion is the lord of all wild beasts, the eagle is the lord of all the birds of the air, and man is the lord of all the creation of God. Yet all of them stand subservient to His throne. There is a picture here of a world

restored, a world back in harmony, delivered from its corruption, taken out of its spoil and its decay, and coming through to a real, divine ecology. Everything is in harmony again under the throne of God, and the only way our world, our physical world, will be redeemed is as men acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ. So we see a restored creation cooperating in bringing the throne of God into every circumstance and situation. But these creatures are represented to us as encircling the throne, for they too have their focus on Jesus. They too look to Him. They too take their command from Him. They do His bidding.

### *The Rainbow*

So Jesus is at the center of the throne, and four living creatures surround the throne. But we see, in chapter 4, that around the throne was a rainbow. The rainbow throughout Scripture is a picture of God's covenant. In fact, it does not appear until the ninth chapter of Genesis, when God hangs it in the sky as a sign of His covenant—not only with Noah and his descendants, but with all of creation. God has made a covenant with inanimate earth. God has made a covenant with the creatures that walk or crawl or fly in our universe. God has made a covenant with the whole of His creation. The sign of that covenant is the rainbow. God said to Noah, "Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth" (Gen. 9:16).

The problem with that, of course, is that we do not always see the rainbow. There have to be the right kind of meteorological conditions in order for us to see the rainbow. You have to have the sun shining and at least heavy moisture in the air, if not rain. You have to have the right conditions to see the rainbow. We occasionally see



it, but not frequently, and therefore you could sit and wonder if God forgets his covenant. And yet when we get a glimpse into the Heavens, we discover that God sees the rainbow all the time because it surrounds his throne. It is not actually a rainbow, in the sense of a bow. It is a full circle. It actually totally surrounds the throne upon which He sits, because every covenant God has ever made revolves around Jesus. All the covenants were covenants of promise. Paul tells us that when we were sinners, when we were separate from God and Christ, we were strangers to the covenants of promise (Eph. 2:12). That tells us that all the covenants God made were covenants of promise. And the picture of the rainbow surrounding Jesus on the throne tells me this: they all become relevant when I come into a relationship with Jesus, because they all speak of Him.

We will look at the covenants later when we come to Chapter 10 and see one of the wonderful pictures of Christ. We will need to talk about the covenants that God has made through history and the covenant into which He has brought us. But for now, let us note that the rainbow encircles the throne. God remembers His covenant. In fact, God looks at everything through the colors of His covenant. God looks at you through the covenant. You may think you are bland, you may think you are ordinary, you may think you are nothing special, but every time God looks at you, He sees you through the multicolored grace of His covenant. He sees you in technicolor! He sees you in brilliant light. He sees you and remembers His covenant.

### *Twenty-four Elders*

Also surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and on them sat twenty-four elders. We are looking here at the government of God's people. One of the other numbers that we

will have to look at because it carries such great significance is the number twelve. It is a very important number in the Book of Revelation because it speaks of God's Kingdom or God's government, and "twelve" conveys that throughout Scripture. That is why we have twelve patriarchs in the Old Testament, and twelve judges are recorded in the book of that name. It is why we have twelve apostles in the New Testament. In our Bible we have twelve minor prophets. It does not mean they were insignificant, only that they wrote smaller books than the others. So we have these twelve minor prophets, which the rabbis used to call "the Twelve." This gives us an idea why Jesus called his disciples "the Twelve": they, too, were going to carry His prophetic word to the world. But He used "twelve" to use the number of God's government and His Kingdom. Twelve times two is twenty-four. We see these twenty-four thrones in Heaven, and it teaches us that God governs His Kingdom through delegated authority. Do you remember that Psalm that says, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.' Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together" (Ps. 122:1-3). "There," continues the Psalmist, "the thrones [note the plural] for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David" (Ps. 122:5). There is one throne, but from that throne comes delegated authority, and so the Psalmist refers to thrones in the plural.

Now, delegated authority only works when it is focused on Jesus; true delegated authority will never lord it over the flock. It will not seek to build its own empire. It will always turn people to Jesus. I like the way these elders are described in the Book of Revelation, and they appear in several sections of the book. They are seated on thrones, so they do have authority. They are wearing golden crowns, so they do have power. There is no question

about that. But every time they think of Jesus, every time the four creatures give them an excuse or an opportunity, they get off their thrones, fall on their faces, take off their crowns, and throw them at the feet of the Lamb. True leaders always know how to worship Jesus because they are focused on Him; they surround His throne. And every one of these elders looks at the Lamb. They have their vision filled with the Lamb. They are sensitive to the moving of the Spirit in the presence of the Lamb. They have given themselves away to the Lamb. They do not think that they have a right to sit on their thrones. They do not believe that the crowns are riveted to their foreheads. They are ready to cast them down and fall on their faces and give worship to Him who lives forever and ever because everything revolves around the Lamb. They have not done a bit of surreptitious furniture removal and put His throne in the corner. It is always in the center, and they surround His throne and look to Him. It is not about you. It is not about me. It is all about Jesus.

### *Multitudes of Angels*

The chapter continues: "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders" (Rev. 5:11). Every angelic being, every archangel and angel, all the cherubim and seraphim, all the hosts of Heaven surround the throne of Jesus. The writer of the Hebrews takes great pains to remind us that Jesus is far greater than the angels, that He is exalted far above the angels. He has a name that no angel can hope to approach. And all the angels of Heaven, all the servants of God, all those ministering spirits surround and crowd in around the throne; they see the Lamb and they worship Him.

If we were to take a stone and drop it in a pool, you know what would happen. You have watched it, I am sure: the ripples move out and out and out. And so it is with Jesus upon His throne. It is as if a holy stone had been set in the midst of the pool of our universe, and the ripple effect has gone out and out and out and out; but it all surrounds and emanates from the throne, and from Him who sits upon the throne, who lives forever and ever. Everything, everything, but everything, revolves around Jesus.

### *Heaven and Earth*

As we move on in this prophetic book, we are going to see a world in rebellion. We catch up with some of the events that are going on in our universe, with sin and wickedness. We see deception and cruelty, and persecution and death. But it is here that we see the real picture. It is here that we face the ultimate reality. It is here that we need to begin our pilgrimage. You see this is not our destiny; this is where we begin. We do not struggle through our troubles hoping that somewhere along the way we will get a glimpse of what God is really after. We begin with a revelation of who He is, and we move with confidence from that moment. You can tackle anything if you have been to this place. You can handle any situation if you have spent time here, with John, in the presence of the Lord who is in the center of His throne, surrounded by four living creatures, encircled by a rainbow, surrounded by twenty-four elders on thrones, and by multitudes of angels. I can handle any situation because it does not end there, either. "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing" (Rev. 5:13). We are going to hear them cry. We are going to hear them yelling. We are going to hear them cursing. We are going to hear them blaspheming. But this is the actual reality. The earth is reserved

to worship God. The earth is designed to bring glory to its creator. Here is the reality. The whole of creation is singing, "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13). Then "The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshiped" (Rev. 5:14). That is the reality of the world in which we live. It isn't fantasy or make believe. It isn't myth, legend, or wishful thinking. This is reality. It is not to deny the troubles in our world, the pain and the disappointment, the hunger and the tragedy. It is not to deny that these exist, but it is to say this: it is destined to change. For in the purpose of God, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). Our world is not reserved for disaster but for deliverance. It is not reserved to wither and die, but to be made new in the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. John begins right here, before a beast has roared, before a false prophet has spoken, before a plague has come, before a trumpet has sounded. He says this is where we begin—in the Heavens. This is where it all comes from. Satan is not in charge of the world. Satan has not written the agenda. Satan does not have a plan that he is pursuing to its ultimate goal and that will succeed. Our God is a God who reigns, who has all things in His power, and He has a determined purpose that will be fulfilled. And whatever Satan seeks to do, he only does it ultimately to further the purposes of God.

### *Perceiving God's Purpose*

When Jesus died, He was crucified by the Romans. Peter tells us that He was delivered to godless hands. It was the Roman Empire, and the power of Caesar and all the battalions of Rome, that were responsible for nailing Him to the cross. But behind

the Romans were the Jews who pressured and persuaded them to crucify Him. Behind the Jews was Judas who betrayed Him. Behind Judas was satan who entered Him. But behind satan was God! For Peter stands up on the day of Pentecost and says, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross" (Acts 2:23). Revelation reveals Jesus as the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. God had a plan. God had a purpose. It was formulated in the courts of Heaven before the world was made. It was brought together in the council rooms of eternity before man ever stood on the world or sin came to corrupt the creation of God. There was a plan laid. There was a Son ready. There was a will formulated and put into action at the right time; and everything that has happened, everything that is happening, and everything that will yet happen is all part of the great mystery of the plan of God that will ultimately redound to His glory as every creature under Heaven joins in the great chorus, the universal celebration, the acclamation of Him who sits upon the throne.

He is the Lord, the creator and the sustainer of all things. When John takes us up into Heaven, he is not representing a church raptured out of the world so that the devil can take over and run amok in the creation of God. He is showing us what happened to each one of us when we repented and believed the Gospel, when we came to faith in Jesus and were seated with Him in the Heavenly realms. From there we look down from the vantage point of eternity, and say, "Ha! I thought that was a problem, but it was part of the purpose; I thought that was a setback, but it was a strategy for divine advance; I thought that was persecution, but it was just the way God brought purity to his people; I thought that was a disaster, but it was God moving,

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manipulating, and juggling the affairs of our world to bring everything into a glorious pattern of divine purpose and ultimate fulfillment." You and I have been caught up in the drama of the ages. You and I are part of a purpose that had its beginnings in the unfathomable depths of God's mind, in the eternities that are behind us. We may not see it come to its fullness in our lifetime, but we nevertheless have a part to play in order to see it fulfilled. If we will see God's purpose and throw ourselves unreservedly into being part of it, we can see it move forward in our generation.

The Book of Revelation helps us understand how God fulfills His purpose. We begin with Jesus encountering John. He meets an individual. He meets His servant. From there He goes on to address the churches in chapters 2 and 3, the seven churches of Asia. From there He goes on to impact the world. In a sense, that is how God has always furthered His purpose. He begins with the individual. From the individual He affects the Church, and the Church then goes on to affect the world. What God shows us in this plan of the book is how He will operate in our own generation. God wants to meet with you, and God wants to meet with me, individually. We have a very intimate and personal relationship with God, and God will not violate that. God wants to maintain and enlarge that relationship we have with Him, and cause it to grow. When you and I are right with God, and each individual in