



St. Paul Lutheran Church

“Your Refuge from the Storm”

# LifeGroup Study

July 14, 2024

Psalm 100; Revelation 4

## Community

### OVERVIEW

While Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, is controversial, it is a message of hope to seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. We will attempt to demystify these writings and see if the revelation contains promise and warning for our times. This is a book of letters, seals, trumpets, angels, dragons, beasts, and bowls. It is filled with mystery, metaphor, judgment, triumph and God’s great good news for us today.

Today’s theme is two great visions: one for the seven churches and one of the presence of God.

### WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO KNOW?

Revelation is a specific kind of literature not primarily concerned with the future, but with the present. Its most common purpose was to assure people that God was faithful despite the prevalence of evil in the world. Two themes emerge from today’s reading: consumerism is the enemy of true worship, and a truncated gospel is the enemy of spiritual vibrancy.

### WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO DO?

We want to respond to the clear challenge that arises out of the murky waters of Revelation 4: God will make of us a people who, like the 24 elders, lay our crowns, our lives, our praise, our adoration, our entire being at the foot of the throne of the One who alone is worthy of our worship.

### INTRODUCTION

Pointillism is a painting technique in which small, distinct dots of pure color are applied to form an image. If you focus on just a few dots you miss the larger image, much like a mosaic. Only by standing back and observing the whole, the big picture, does the painting make sense. This art form is instructive for our understanding of Revelation. It’s filled with confusing, confounding, crazy stuff; we could get lost in the details and miss the big picture.

### ICEBREAKER

Where has consumerism invaded the church in general, and the worship life of the church in particular? If you had 30 seconds or less to describe the message of Revelation, what would you say?

### PRAY TOGETHER

Father God, you poured yourself out in love for your world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. You made us to pour ourselves out in love for others and, in doing so, find true contentment. You alone are worthy to receive glory, honor, and power. By your Holy Spirit, work in us so that we lay our entire being at the foot of the throne of the One who alone is worthy of our worship. Amen.

## Content

### BACKGROUND

**Assumption #1:** John’s revelation is apocalyptic literature, and must be treated differently than other forms of literature. We do this because the original audience would have read it differently. Apocalyptic literature, and therefore John’s revelation, is not only or even primarily concerned with the future. Attempts to use John’s revelation as a crystal ball, seeking to read current events through the lens of this book in order to predict the future, are misguided at best. The *Left Behind* interpretation of John’s revelation completely misses the point of the book for the original audience and for us.

**Assumption #2:** While highly symbolic and therefore rather mysterious to us, we assume that the original audience understood John’s revelation much more readily than we do because of their context. Craig S. Keener, in his commentary, puts it this way: “John’s symbols may appear obscure to us, but they were mostly fathomable (or at least evocative) to the believers in the seven churches, at least after some reflection.” Therefore, we need to read John’s revelation primarily through a first-century, contextual lens as best we are able.

**DISCUSSION** Have you ever read anything from the *Left Behind* series? Why do you think this series of books became so popular?

### ORIGINAL CONTEXT

Because the vision of chapter four follows the seven letters to the seven churches, we can assume that they are thematically connected. This vision is probably for the benefit of the seven churches, speaking something important into their life together. In order to make any sense of this vision, it might help to lay out the letters’ themes.

The core theme of all seven letters is encouragement to both persevere and conquer. It appears that the churches were facing at least two difficult enemies: false teachers and the Roman Empire. This second enemy seems to be the greater issue.

When Revelation was written (around 90 A.D.), Jerusalem had been destroyed and Rome had suffered through a series arrogant and violent emperors, including Caligula, Nero and Domitian. Roman culture continued to decline morally. Complacency and cultural compromise were core challenges for these first-century Christians. While persecution may have been an issue, it seems that Revelation speaks to churches that are in danger of dying from spiritual apathy more than from Roman persecution.

**DISCUSSION** How did the violence of Roman oppression impact the churches forming at this time? Are complacency and cultural compromise issues for our churches today?

(*Read Revelation 4.*) Against this backdrop comes the vision in chapter 4. John’s vision of God’s throne room resembles similar Old Testament visions (Isaiah 6:1-5; Ezekial 1:4-28; Daniel 7:9-14). In Jewish mysticism, beholding the throne of God was actually

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the goal of one's spiritual journey (3 Enoch 1), but John is simply transported there by the Spirit. The throne room, or heavenly court, is an ancient image of God's sovereign rule over all of creation. In this case it creates a stark contrast to the emperor worship of the first century.

The vision of grandeur and beauty befits God's majesty. The color, the gemstones, and the brilliance all point to God's glory. Commentators differ in their interpretation of the 24 elders (priests, angels, all believers), but what matters more than their exact identity is their function. They worship the King, honoring God as Creator, and they submit to the King by casting their crowns before God's throne. While these crowns could signify that these 24 elders are rulers, it is more likely that they signify victory, perhaps those believers who have conquered or overcome adversity as mentioned in the seven letters.

**DISCUSSION** If you were standing before the throne of God, what would you do? How is this scene a picture of worship?

To the original audience, the seven churches, the impact and implications of this vision would have been clear. God and God alone is worthy of our praise, not the Caesars of their day. Compromising their faith or becoming complacent would be foolish in light of God's majesty and sovereign power.

It's important to note that the original audience would not have perceived the vision as a future reality, but a present reality. They understood it as an unseen parallel to their own world. This was God's Kingdom in heaven, and these first-century Christians were being challenged to live into this same Kingdom reality on earth as it is in heaven. By God's grace and power they could do so.

**DISCUSSION** How would the message of Revelation be threatening to the Roman Empire? If the Kingdom of heaven is at hand, how do we see the Kingdom in everyday life?

### GOING DEEPER:

Consumerism as the enemy of true worship. If we're honest, we'll admit that worship has become all about us in many ways. We expect worship to feed us. We expect worship to make us feel a certain way. If we don't like what we experience at one church, if it doesn't meet our needs, we simply go to another church. When we carry these attitudes into the throne room of John's revelation we quickly see the absurdity of it all. Can you imagine the elders saying, "We sang this same song last week. If you don't change it up I'm not casting down my crown anymore!" Worship isn't about how we feel any more than real love is about how we feel. Worship, like real love, is all about what we do.

The great lie of consumerism is that if we could just have more, get fed more, we'd be satisfied. John's revelation reminds us that we were made to pour ourselves out, and in so doing we will discover true satisfaction. Read or sing this hymn stanza together:

*Finish, then, Thy new creation; Pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see Thy great salvation, Perfectly restored in Thee,  
Changed from glory into glory, Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before Thee, Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

A truncated gospel is the enemy of spiritual vibrancy. Why is there so much complacency in American Christianity? Why are there so many at St. Paul who are content to have their name on the church books and merely fulfill their "religious duty" at Christmas and Easter? Perhaps, in part, it's because the gospel has been truncated to a kind of "get-out-of-hell-free" religion encouraging people to think that Christianity has very little to do with real life, right here and now. When eternal life is only what happens after we die, then the truncated gospel encourages us to dissociate our faith from daily life. It implies that this world isn't worth investing into, because faith is all about escaping the evils of this world. This, however, is not the gospel according to Jesus. Jesus' gospel invites us to live into the new Kingdom that he inaugurated, a Kingdom meant to mirror the unseen Kingdom of heaven. This gospel invites us to a life of passionate discipleship in which we throw down the crown of our own agenda, of a self-seeking, self-serving life, and love as we have first been loved.

**DISCUSSION** In what ways have we become consumers of worship? If the gospel is more than getting out of hell, what else is the gospel about?

## Application

Don't be afraid of Revelation. Consider reading *Revelation and the End of All Things* by Craig R. Koester. It's an easy-to-understand journey through Revelation. As a group, talk about where consumerism has invaded your own faith and worship life. In prayer, confess it to God.

**Confession:** We are caught in the cycle of consumerism that wants us to believe that getting more will make us happier. We live in our own self-centered universe where our needs and wants are the focus for living every day. We have reduced worship to what we expect to feel or experience in order to get our needs met. Forgive us.

**Offer forgiveness to one another.** God forgives you. God forgives us. We are free to worship the One who alone is worthy of our worship. God has given us Jesus, who died on a cross and rose from death so that all might receive forgiveness of sin. When we begin to comprehend the awesome power of God, we want to respond by laying our crowns before Jesus, lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Talk about what repentance looks like (*turning around, changing direction*). Hold one another accountable in the coming weeks.

### PRAY TOGETHER

You are God; is that simple and yet that profound. You made us, and we belong to you. We are your people, and you care for us and nourish us. We want to give thanks to you and bless your name. We want to cast our crowns before you, lost in wonder, love and praise. You are sheer goodness and beauty, and you are faithful now and forever. We worship you, the One who is Three-in-One: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Revelation 4:1-11 NLT Then as I looked, I saw a door standing open in heaven, and the same voice I had heard before spoke to me like a trumpet blast. The voice said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this.” (2) And instantly I was in the Spirit, and I saw a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it. (3) The one sitting on the throne was as brilliant as gemstones—like jasper and carnelian. And the glow of an emerald circled his throne like a rainbow. (4) Twenty-four thrones surrounded him, and twenty-four elders sat on them. They were all clothed in white and had gold crowns on their heads. (5) From the throne came flashes of lightning and the rumble of thunder. And in front of the throne were seven torches with burning flames. This is the sevenfold Spirit of God. (6) In front of the throne was a shiny sea of glass, sparkling like crystal. In the center and around the throne were four living beings, each covered with eyes, front and back. (7) The first of these living beings was like a lion; the second was like an ox; the third had a human face; and the fourth was like an eagle in flight. (8) Each of these living beings had six wings, and their wings were covered all over with eyes, inside and out. Day after day and night after night they keep on saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty—the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come.” (9) Whenever the living beings give glory and honor and thanks to the one sitting on the throne (the one who lives forever and ever), (10) the twenty-four elders fall down and worship the one sitting on the throne (the one who lives forever and ever). And they lay their crowns before the throne and say, (11) “You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased.”