**Revelation 4 to 7 Looking up to see the future**

**Introduction**

On Friday evening, 29 January 1999, I took a thirty-minute phone call from Revd John Hamilton, a retired Baptist minister who had been my mentor for ministry. It was most unusual in a number of respects. Firstly, he rarely called on the phone, as he always preferred to speak to people in person. Secondly, his calls although very friendly, were short and to the point, covering the issue for which the phone call had been made. But not on that occasion, it was so different, he asked about how I was doing and the work in the church in Cumbernauld, but most of the call was taken up with his enthusiasm for the sermon he had written for the following Sunday morning based on Revelation 4, with a focus on the words of Revelation4:1: *After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, ‘****Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this****.*’ His voice was full of excitement in anticipation of what lay in store for the believer going up to heaven. The call finished close to 10pm. Before midnight he was with the Lord after a massive brain haemorrhage that the doctor said would have been a very quick death. He was ready to meet His Lord. The joy of knowing Jesus he had experienced as a young person was there to the end. He kept his eye on what was most important; urging people to put their faith in Jesus. Looking up to see the future was certainly something that was central in his life – is it in yours and mine? Are you ready today, if the Lord should call you home?

 The book of Revelation in a series of visions covers the time from the first to the second coming of Jesus. It is intentionally a ‘broad-brush’ approach to painting the picture of life for the people of God over two thousand years of history. In simple terms, it is a calling to keep our eyes on Jesus and the calling entrusted to us. It is a solemn reminder that life for some believers in every generation will be extremely difficult, and for a small number, honouring the Lord Jesus will cost them their lives. Events will take place in the world across our lifetimes that will be very difficult to deal with or work through. In our case, with modern technology, we can get live feed from every major conflict zone and the brutal consequences of war shown on our screens. How can we simply move on to the next work task or social engagement after processing some of these horrific events? Yet, the repeated message of the book of Revelation is not to be fearful for the future; instead, to remember that the Lord God Almighty reigns. To remember, that at God’s appointed time the Lord Jesus will come again to usher in the end of the age. We are invited to keep on looking up to see the future that is in His hands.

1. **Revelation 4: A glimpse into heaven**

(a)**The vision of the throne** (Revelation 4:1-6)

# *After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ 2At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. 3And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. 4Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. 5From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. 6Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the centre, round the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and behind.* Our life in this world is as fragile ‘like a candle in the wind’ as Elton John memorably sang in 1997 at the funeral of the late Diana, Princess of Wales. John the apostle is a prisoner in a slate quarry on Patmos, probably in chains, and imprisoned for his faith. He is given an invitation to have a revelation of God’s glory. God the Father is invisible (I Timothy 6:16) so the only person John could see in his Revelations is the glorified Lord Jesus. The language John uses to explain what he glimpsed is something so glorious and beautiful that human vocabulary was inadequate to express it. He uses the picture of precious stones: *jasper* or diamond representing an absolutely clear symbol of God’s purity and holiness; then *ruby* blood-red, a picture of the wrath of God against sin covered by the blood of Jesus that purifies us from all unrighteousness; the third *emerald* that beautiful green colour, a picture of tranquillity. He speaks of… *A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne* (Revelations4:3b); we think of a rainbow visible after the rain or the storm. It is peaceful and still and we look up at the sky and take delight in all its colours.Heaven will be that place of shalom, that experience of tranquillity where the stresses and fears of this life will be noticeably absent. All God’s people will one day share this joy. The number twenty-four (thrones /elders) symbolises the twelve tribes of Israel representing the Old Testament people of God, together with the twelve apostles, the New Testament people of God – none will be missing for whom Christ died. The *white robes* representing the perfect righteousness of Jesus credited to our account as a result of His substitutionary sacrifice in our place on the cross. The crowns on their heads are the rewards for service for the Lord. Inverse five, the seven-branched candlestick, the Menorah, whose flowing olive oil keeps the lamps lit, representing the poured out Spirit of God in His fullness to the people of God. The sea of glass comes from the Wilderness imagery in the time of Moses, when a large bowl of water used by the priests to wash their hands ceremonially when on duty, points to the picture of God surrounded by absolute purity (4:6) and nothing unholy can approach Him. It is a sin-free environment that we struggle to imagine, but John has a glimpse of glory in this pointer to the future for the people of God. It is like a peep through the curtains to see the stars on a clear starry night.

(b)**The living creatures around the throne** (Revelation4:7-11) In these verses, as in the book of Ezekiel chapters 1 and 10, are attempts to describe the indescribable. The clue is in the word *like*. Representations of the ministering angels were carved on the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:20); the scene here is similar to the vision of Isaiah when he encountered Jesus (see John 12:41) in his vision of God in the Jerusalem Temple when he was called to serve God (Isaiah 6:3). *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,” who was, and is, and is to come* (Rev. 4:8b).The other biblical glimpse of this heavenly scene was at the resurrection of Jesus where Mary (John 20:12) looking into the tomb:… *saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.* It is a glimpse of heaven as John is looking up to see the future in the presence of God. The number twenty-four again, the complete number of the people of God will be there from across the ages to enjoy the wonder of eternity in His nearer presence.This blessing of enjoying God’s presence naturally overflows into worship. *You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being* (Revelation 4:11). It ought to lead us on earth to overflow with praise and thanksgiving too.

2. **Revelation 5: The glory of the Lamb**

(a) **The triumph of the Lamb** (Revelation 5:1-7) Have you ever attempted to write down ahead of time details of a future event put it in an envelope and come back to it afterwards? How well could you summarise your life over a year, seal the envelope ahead of the start of January and open it at the end of December to see how well you fared! This is the image here in Revelation 5:1-5: *Then I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.****2****And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’****3****But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.****4****I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.****5****Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.* What God has planned will come to pass over history – Jesus is the key to its revelation in His person and in His death on the cross in our place. Jesus is *the Lion of the tribe of Judah* (Genesis 49:9-10)*,* and the prophesied descendant of David *the Root of David* (Isaiah 11:1) **How is Jesus the means of reconciliation with God the Father?** Revelation 5:6-7:*Then I saw a Lamb,* ***looking as if it had been slain****, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.****7****He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.* The picture painted here is of some extraordinary images: The lion who is sovereign (Rev.5:5) is the lamb who was slain (Rev.5:6). This lamb *had seven horns and seven eyes…* Seven is the perfect number in Revelation with *the seven spirits of God* (or the sevenfold Spirit of God)is the Holy Spirit, ie that it was only through the enabling power of the Spirit that Jesus accomplished all the Father had given Him to do on earth (Hebrews 9:14: *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*

If this mix of imagery is not enough to get your head round, there is another point that needs to be made. The Greek word for lamb, for example, in John1:29, where John the Baptist says some profound words about Jesus: *The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!* We rightly picture a little vulnerable lamb there. But not in the book of Revelation, here it is a completely different word that refers to the powerful chief ram that leads the flock forward. This is an image of strength with an expectation of final victory. It is no longer as the suffering servant; now it is a second coming that is envisaged that will result in victory over those who do evil, especially over those who persecute and oppress His people.

(b) **The worship of the Lamb** (Revelation 5:8-14) What is the fruit of this amazing work of Jesus? Revelation 5:9b-10: *‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.* ***10****You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth. ’*Jesus’ suitability to ‘open the scroll of history’ was based on His success in the work that began in His earthly ministry leading to the launch of the Church on the Day of Pentecost. How widespread was the Church in God’s world? Then, small numbers in the Mediterranean world, but now *persons from every tribe and language and people and nation* are followers of Jesus. Then and now individuals and small groups of ordinary people made up the vast majority of the Early Church. The ought not to fear for the future because God is on the throne; because Jesus has paid the price for us and rose victoriously. The certain triumph of God in and through His people, brings us now, like John then, to the place of worship and adoration: ***11****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.****12****In a loud voice they were saying: ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!’* ***13****Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: ‘To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power,
for ever and ever!’* All creation is joining in in this triumph song of victory. Are you and I followers of Jesus? If you are – keep looking up to see the future, because the Lord God Almighty reigns! Jesus is worthy of all your praises and mine today?

3. **Revelation 6: Dark clouds overhead**

The style of writing from Revelation 6 onwards is deeply unfamiliar to most of us and we can struggle to grasp what John is saying. However, the message itself is simple, once we get to grips with the cultural form of it. Documents up to the nineteenth century were sealed with wax seals. Only authorised persons to whom the document was addressed could open them. We get that with posted mail today. The same principle applies. Here the scroll in John’s vision (Revelation 5:1) had seven seals and all had to be opened (Revelation 8:1) to read the scroll containing information on human history between the first and second comings of Jesus.

(a) **The opening of the seals** (Revelation 6:1-8*) I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals* (Rev.6:1). Jesus alone has the authority to take charge over human history at the end of the age (Rev.5:1). The One who humbled Himself and was obedient to death on a cross (Philippians 2) is now exalted to the highest place of power and authority. It is not Caesar in Rome who is ultimately in charge, even though Emperor Domitian, the one in power when John was on Patmos, who claimed divine powers, Jesus is Lord! This was a shocking thing to say when Domitian was demanding absolute loyalty from all his subjects. The imagery of four horses as symbols of divine judgement comes from Zechariah 6:1-8 in the Old Testament. There the red horse was a reminder that there will be wars and bloodshed, empires will rise and fall; the Black horse was a symbol of suffering through famine and death; the dappled or pale horse of pestilences and disasters of carious kinds, but the white horse was the symbol of conquest and victory. At the end of the age, we read in Revelation 19:11*:* *I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True...* All these disastrous things will happen in recorded history, but none will stop the triumph of King Jesus. Jesus, in Matthew chapter twenty-four, makes a similar point in more conventional language and calls us not to be distracted from our calling to live for Him today. What events have the potential to distract you and me today?

(b) **The** **cry of the martyrs** (Revelation 6: 9-11) *They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?* (Rev. 6:10). In Romans 12:18-19, Paul wrote: *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.****19****Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’says the Lord.* Final judgement is God’s call not ours. Psalm 116:15 declared: *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His faithful servants.*The wicked may evade justice in this life, but God will ensure it is done. Looking up to see the future in our world of so much injustice and unfairness we come to the One who will right wrongs on that day.

(c) **The final judgement** (Revelation 6:12-17) ***15****Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.****16****They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!****17****For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?’* We have the choice in this life. We can take a chance and pretend God does not exist and that there is no final accounting to Him – and face the consequences. Or we can repent of our sins and put our faith and trust in Jesus and know our future is secure with Him. In the early centuries AD world, Christians were mocked as weak and foolish for worshipping a crucified Saviour. The famous graffi uncovered in Rome, dated c.200AD of Alexemnos worshipping his god was a mockery of Christians by the Roman elite. Be assured that God will have the final say over all!

4. **Revelation 7: Our God reigns!**

(a)**All God’s people will be there** (Revelation7:1-8) The question was asked in Rev.6:17, if anyone would be saved. The answer is of course, yes, by God’s grace. When our claim to heaven is based on Jesus’ perfect sacrifice in our place, we stand on solid ground. Revelation 7:1-8 speaks of God’s protection of His people. *After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.****2****Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea:****3****‘Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God* (Rev.7:1-4)*.* Do you feel weak and vulnerable at times? Or at this time? You are secure as His child in His hands. No child of God will be lost eternally. In Exodus 12 when the Israelites left Egypt led by Moses, how were they protected from the actions of the angel of death? It was in the houses marked on the doorposts by the blood of the lamb (Exodus12:13). Our sin was ‘covered’ by the blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross. Paul expressed it this way in II Timothy 2:19: *Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.’* The numbers in verses 4-8 are symbolic of the complete number of the Old Testament people of God – none will be missing.

(b) **A glimpse into heaven** (Revelation 7:9-17) What about the last two thousand years? *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.****10****And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’* Thousands of years ago, God made a promise to Abraham: God *took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’* (Genesis 15:5-6). As believers, we are ‘children of Abraham’.*Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.****17****As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.*’ (Romans 4:16) The devil may do his worst, but God wins! In His eternal kingdom, nothing will separate us from His presence and His love. **What will we be doing in eternity?**

* Times of praise and worship (Revelation7:10-12);
* Times of reflection on the wonders of God’s grace and goodness (Revelation7:13-14);
* Times of work and acts of service without getting tired or exhausted (Revelation 7:15a);
* Time for enjoying the peace and security of His sovereign protection, so we have no worries or fears for the future (Revelation7:15b);
* A Time of complete satisfaction with His provision for our needs (Revelation7:16-18);

This vision concludes with these remarkable words, describing the end of this age *For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; “He will lead them to springs of living water.” “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”* (Revelation7:17) Looking up to see the future helps us see the extraordinary future God has planned for us. I look forward with increasing anticipation to that day. Do you? Have you put your trust in Jesus? Is He your Lord and Saviour? If you can say ‘yes’ then this is what you can look forward to, when Jesus either comes back or calls you home first, Amen

**Questions for Reflection:**

1. Are you ready for Jesus’ return? If not, what is stopping you from putting your faith in Jesus today?

2. How does the message of these chapters help you be assured about the future?

**Song for Reflection:** ‘When the trumpet of the Lord will sound’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjCY0FymNGw>