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LONG LIVE THE KING!

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

With the Democratic convention in Boston ten days ago the election campaign moved into high gear. John Kerry reported for duty as the Democratic candidate and is now out on the campaign trail reassuring the electorate that “help is on the way.” On November 2 the nation will go to the polls, and on January 20 either Bush or Kerry will be inaugurated as the president of the United States.

In my homeland the UK we don't have presidential inaugurations; we have royal coronations. There are several major differences between a presidential inauguration and a royal coronation. Coronations are much less frequent. The last coronation in the UK was that of Elizabeth II on June 2, 1953 (she acceded to the throne on February 6, 1952). Coronations are occasions for great public joy. In 1727 Handel wrote four anthems for the coronation of George II; at least one of these anthems has been sung at every British coronation since. Perhaps the best known of these is *Zadok the Priest*, which takes its words from the coronation of Solomon (1 Kgs 1:39-40),

All the people rejoiced and said,
 “God save the king,
 long live the king,
 may the king live for ever!”

It would seem very odd to sing that at a presidential inauguration: “Long live the president!” At a coronation all the people rejoice. At a presidential inauguration only half the people rejoice. At a coronation all the people cry, “Long live the king!” At an inauguration half the people want the new president to live only four years. Even the other half want him to live only eight years and then vacate the scene for the next candidate. Ex-president Clinton's appearance on the stage in Boston ten days ago was a little problematic: he delighted the crowd but detracted attention from Kerry.

A president campaigns for office, is elected by the will of the people, and serves for a fixed term. A monarch does not campaign for office, but accedes to the throne by right and serves without term. The UK has had the same monarch since 1952. In Thailand, where I spent my childhood, King Bhumipol has ruled since 1946. Imagine Truman still being president!

This is not an argument for the US to become a monarchy, but a call for us to put presidential notions out of our mind as we come to today's text, which describes not a presidential inauguration but a coronation.

A. The Seventh Trumpet: Long Live the King! (11:15)

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.” (11:15 NIV)

To properly understand the seventh trumpet it is important that we understand the flow of the last six chapters (6-11), the account

of the seven seals and the seven trumpets. The opening of the first six seals unleashed terrifying scenes of God's judgment upon a rebellious world. The sixth seal closed with the question, “Who can stand on the day of God's wrath?” (6:17). An interlude consisting of two visions into heaven gave us the answer to that question: the angels stand, restraining judgment till the saints are sealed (7:1-8), and the saints themselves, having endured tribulation on earth, stand in God's presence, offering him their praise (7:9-17). Only then, with the assurance of the security of the saints, did we proceed to the opening of the seventh seal. We expected a climactic end to the judgments, but the opening of the seventh seal was totally unlike the first six seals. Instead of a tumultuous final act of judgment, there was silence in heaven as God listened to the prayers of his saints.

The opening of the seventh seal unleashed the seven trumpets, which have unfolded in a manner similar to the seven seals. The first six trumpets unleashed terrifying scenes of God's judgment upon a rebellious world. These judgments were in response to the prayers of the saints, and were also calls to repentance. But at the end of the sixth trumpet we saw that “the rest,” those left alive after these judgments, still did not repent (9:20-21). This raised another question: if the world rejected God's call to repentance issued through his judgments, how would the world ever be brought to glorify God? Another interlude, again consisting of two episodes, gave us the answer to that question. In chapter 10, John was given a bitter-sweet scroll to eat, with instructions that he must prophesy to the nations its contents: the mystery of God, the good news of salvation. Last week we saw why the scroll containing this mystery was bitter-sweet. The church is called to a life of faithful prophetic witness to God and to Christ. Such witness will be costly, for the faithful witnesses die, but God vindicates his saints by raising them to new life. Remarkably, it is this which brings “the rest” to repentance (10:13). Only now, with this assurance of the conversion of the nations, do we proceed to the blowing of the seventh trumpet.

Again we expect a climactic end, a final act of judgment. Instead we find that the blowing of the seventh trumpet is totally unlike the other six trumpets. Instead of a tumultuous final act of judgment, a great shout of victory goes up in heaven. The end has come, but not the way we were expecting it. The end has come not with the destruction of the world but with the coronation of the King.

It is important that we heed these two interludes, between the sixth and seventh seals and between the sixth and seventh trumpets. The first six seals and the first six trumpets are all about judgment as God poured out his wrath on a rebellious world. There have been twelve scenes of devastation upon every corner of the world. The wrath of God on a rebellious world is an important truth; if God does not call the wicked to account, then this is a very sad world. But if you focus attention on these acts of devastation you get a very distorted view of God, a one-sided caricature of God as an angry judge dispensing harsh punishment. Sadly, this is the God portrayed

in too much of the popular Christian analysis of Revelation. Books like the *Left Behind* series and *The Late Great Planet Earth*, movies such as *Like a Thief in the Night*, focus great attention on the devastation which God visits upon the earth during the Great Tribulation. They are full of violence, gore and suffering, of pilotless aircraft plowing into the ground, of weaponry used on all sides, not least by God's people. The result is a ruined and devastated earth. These books and movies arouse two diametrically opposed responses: fear and fascination. People are afraid that they or their loved ones will be left behind. Or they're fascinated trying to figure out the military hardware or the Armageddon battle plan.

Is this the message of Revelation? Is this the correct portrayal of God? It is if you edit Revelation down to just the "interesting stuff": the first six seals, the first six trumpets, the mark of the beast, the seven bowls (which include the single verse about Armageddon), etc. We need to read all of the book. We need to counterbalance the first six seals and the first six trumpets with both the interludes and the seventh of each series. They give a needed corrective to any lopsided view of God.

In the first interlude, between the sixth and seventh seals, we're assured that God's people have nothing to fear. The saints are called to endure the tribulation which is the expected lot of all God's people throughout time, but this means simply following the Lamb. The saints are sealed, and will one day stand in God's presence. Their destiny is to gather around the throne of God and the Lamb singing their praises. The second interlude shows us that God's way of salvation is not the way of the gun-slinging hero but the way of the slain servant. God will win the nations through the faithful suffering witness of his saints, who follow in the footsteps of Jesus the archetypal faithful suffering witness. The seventh seal depicts silence in heaven as God hears the prayers of his saints. The seventh trumpet shows noisy acclamation in heaven as God and his Messiah are acclaimed King. We should be fascinated with Revelation, but the object of our fascination should not be military hardware and battle plans. Instead it should be God and the Lamb.

With the blowing of the seventh trumpet we again find ourselves in the heavenly throne room, where loud voices sing a song of victory, "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." God is acclaimed King not because he won a popular vote, nor because he beat out rival claimants through brute force. He is, by right, King of the universe because he created the universe. Similarly, the Lamb did not win a popular vote; indeed, he was despised and rejected. But God has installed him as King over his kingdom because he accomplished the task God gave him, to be a faithful and obedient servant, even to the point of death, and thus win a great victory over death, sin and Satan. He is the victor, vindicated by God in resurrection, ascension and enthronement. Eugene Boring comments,

This does not mean that the throne of the universe is occupied by two persons, but that God, the ruler of the universe, has functionally defined his rule with his act in Jesus...God rules, but God has definitively manifested his rule in Jesus...who turned out not to be the Lion who devoured our enemies but the Lamb who was slain.¹

The whole universe is the Lord's, but his sovereignty has not been universally acknowledged. The kingdom of this world is the world in opposition to God, the realm of "the inhabitants of the earth," of "the nations," of "the kings of the earth." In the next few chapters we'll be introduced to the ringleaders of the rebellion, portrayed as a counterfeit trinity of dragon, beast and false prophet. To the earthbound

eye it seems that these three have total power, that their sovereignty is universal. But the heavenward eye of faith sees that in heaven God's sovereignty has been acknowledged all along, and that one day it will be acknowledged on earth as well. Following the instruction of the Lord himself, God's people pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The trumpets are God's response to the prayers of the saints, prayers which have been heard in heaven. Now we see the accomplishment of those prayers: the transfer of all sovereignty from the imposters to the rightful owners.

Revelation was written around AD 95, during the reign of emperor Domitian (81-96). He built himself a large palace in Rome, complete with an impressive throne room. He insisted on being addressed as *dominus et deus*, "Lord and God." In John's hometown Ephesus a huge temple was built dedicated to him as *sebastos*, as worthy of worship. Here and throughout the empire he was worshiped as Lord and acclaimed as worthy. But it was all a smoke and mirrors act. Domitian's reign was not eternal. In 96 he was assassinated and the Senate passed a resolution of *damnatio memoriae*, damnation of his memory. His name was blotted out and worship of him ceased.

Domitian was an imposter and his throne in Rome a counterfeit. Again and again Revelation shows us that the real throne is in heaven, where God and the Lamb are acclaimed as truly worthy. Revelation is filled with the songs being sung in heaven around this throne. Sadly, too many Christians are unaware that these songs are even there. This coronation song is perhaps more familiar because Handel uses it in the Hallelujah Chorus of the *Messiah*, together with two verses from chapter 19,

Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. (19:6)

The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever. (11:15)

King of kings and Lord of lords. (19:16)

Hallelujah!

The *Messiah* is not only a great piece of music, but also a great piece of theology. The oratorio, whose text is nothing but Scripture juxtaposed from both Old and New Testaments, is in three parts. Part 1 covers the prophetic promises of the Messiah, plus his birth and ministry. It begins with God's call, "Comfort ye my people" (Isa 40:1) and ends with Messiah's invitation, "Come unto him all ye that labor...his yoke is easy" (Matt 11:28-30). Part 2 covers his passion and vindication: his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension. It begins with "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1:29) and ends with "Hallelujah!" Part 3 covers the ramifications of Messiah's victory over death: because Messiah has triumphed over the grave, death has lost its sting, thanks be to God. It begins with "I know that my Redeemer liveth" (Job 19:25-26) and ends with "Worthy is the Lamb!" (Rev 5:12-14). The Hallelujah Chorus is the climax to Part 2; the Messiah's coronation completes God's vindication of the passion of his obedient servant. In light of what God has done through his Messiah it is only fitting that the whole work end with another song from Revelation,

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen. (Rev 5:12-14)

To appreciate Revelation you would be far better off to put away the *Left Behind* books, and instead listen to the *Messiah* a few times. The Lamb is enthroned because he has won a great victory, but that

victory has been won without military hardware, not as a conquering Lion but as a slain Lamb. The Lord's Army wins not by the use of power but by maintaining their faithful witness and by following the Lamb wherever he goes. The story ends not with a devastated earth in ruins but with everyone gathered around the throne singing, "Worthy is the Lamb!"

B. The Response of the Elders: It's Time! (11:16-18)

Most of the heavenly songs in Revelation are antiphonal, as the various groups gathered around the throne sing back and forth, stirring one another up to praise God and the Lamb. These songs are sung by the four cherubim, the 24 elders, the countless angels, the countless saints, even all creation. No one is silent. Now the twenty-four elders respond to the lead of the loud voices, by offering up a song of thanksgiving. But first they must assume the appropriate posture. These elders, who form God's heavenly court, have thrones and crowns, but these are inappropriate when it is time to worship one who is vastly superior to them. Repeatedly John sees them vacate their thrones, falling on their faces before the throne (4:10; 5:8,14; 11:16; 19:4).

And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying:

**"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
the One who is and who was,
because you have taken your great power
and have begun to reign.
The nations were angry;
and your wrath has come.
The time has come for judging the dead,
and for rewarding your servants the prophets
and your saints and those who reverence your name,
both small and great—
and for destroying those who destroy the earth."**

The elders give thanks to the "Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was." Lord God Almighty is the same as Lord God of Hosts in the Old Testament, the God who has overwhelming resources at his disposal. He is the Almighty, but the Greek word Pantocrator implies not so much all power but all rule. God is the ruler of all; all sovereignty is his. He also is "the One who is and who was." No longer is he "the One who is and who was and who is to come" (1:4; 8; 4:8). Now he has come, just as his saints have prayed for.

All worship in Revelation is responsive, reacting to something that is seen or heard about God and the Lamb. We can't "just praise the Lord." We need to be given reason to praise. We need to see God and Christ in the splendor of their being and deeds. Then the worship should flow naturally. The worship of the elders is responsive. They respond to the coronation song by acclaiming God, they give reason for their acclamation, and they add commentary. We would do well to follow their example in our worship.

The elders give thanks because God has come and commenced his reign. God has never ceased being sovereign. This world continues to function because of God's sovereign superintendence and providence. Revelation offers no room for open theism, for God being contingent upon the behavior of mankind, for God being vulnerable in the development of his plans for the world he has made. He is and always has been the King, though that sovereignty has usually not been acknowledged on earth. Now in Revelation, we have reached

the end, when his kingdom is come on earth as it has been all along in heaven.

The elders follow their acclamation of God with a commentary on the significance of the coronation, starting with a reference to Psalm 99:1, "The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble." The contrast between the uproar of the nations and God's effortless exercise of his sovereignty is a frequent theme in Scripture, notably in Psalm 2:

**Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the Lord
and against his Anointed One...
Then he rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
"I have installed my King
on Zion, my holy hill." (Ps 2:1-6)**

The nations, which we've seen is one of John's terms for those in opposition to God, agitate against God's purposes. But nothing can thwart those purposes; when God calls, "Time!" it is time. In a case of poetic justice he exercises his wrath against the wrathful. Though it seem harsh and cruel, the wrath of God is a very necessary belief. If at some point God does not call, "Time!" then it is true that "might is right."

The arrival of the day of God's wrath means it is time for doing three things: judging the dead, rewarding the saints, and destroying the destroyers. The day of the Lord is a day of judgment. All will be brought before the judgment throne of God, where two sets of books will be opened: books in which are written the deeds of each person, and the book of life in which are written names. The dead will be judged according to what they have done as written in the books, but only those whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire (20:12, 15).

The day of the Lord is a day of salvation, dispensing rewards to those whose names are in the book of life. These people are described with three synonymous terms: his servants, his prophets and saints, and those who reverence or fear his name. Their rewards include those promised the victor in each church: access to the tree of life in God's paradise (2:7), immunity from the second death (2:11), hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name (2:17), authority and the morning star (2:29), white robes, an indelible name in the book of life, and Jesus' acknowledgement before his Father (3:5), incorporation into God's temple (3:12), and the right to sit beside Jesus on his throne (3:21). The greatest reward of all will be to see the face of God (22:4).

The day of the Lord is a day for purging the world of evil, the day when he will destroy the destroyers. God's purpose is not the destruction of the earth, but the removal of the destroyers. The destroyers are led by their captain, Abaddon, Apollyon, the Destroyer (9:11). Subsequent chapters will tell us more about him, Satan, the dragon. Contrary to what some Christians teach, the world is not "headed to hell in a handbasket." It is the destroyers of the earth, not the earth itself, who are headed to hell. As for the earth, God will restore it so it can be part of the new heavens and the new earth.

C. Theophany: God's Loyalty to Covenant (11:19)

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of light-

ning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.

After the elders' hymn of thanks, John sees God's heavenly temple opened. The earthly temple was only ever a copy of the heavenly reality of God's dwelling place. Moses was shown a heavenly pattern for the tabernacle (Exod 25:9 etc). God himself gave David the plans for the temple (1 Chr 28:12, 19). The earthly temple was only ever temporary. It was a very precious and gracious gift, for God put his presence among his people on earth. But the temple was less than perfect; it confined God's earthly presence to a physical locality to which access was limited.

Inside the temple, in the Holy of Holies, was the ark of the covenant. The ark was a wooden chest covered in gold; inside were three memorial items: the Ten Commandments, a pot of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded (Heb 9:4). The chest was covered with a solid gold lid, the atonement cover or mercy seat, on which stood two golden cherubim. This was God's earthly throne, seated on the mercy seat between the two cherubim, with the ark as his footstool. It was called the ark of the covenant or the ark of the testimony, because God gave Moses his testimony to put inside it. That testimony was the ten commandments, the treaty document between God and his people whereby he entered into covenant with them, binding himself to them as their God, and binding themselves to him as his people, as expressed in the statement that lies at the heart of the covenant, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." It was here at the mercy seat, the atonement cover, that God met with his people through the intermediary of the high priest. It was here that the sins of his people were atoned for through the blood of a sacrificial lamb on the Day of Atonement. It was here that God put his presence among his people. But the ark, just like the temple which contained it, was only a copy of a heavenly reality. The copy is no longer on earth for Indiana Jones to find. The heavenly reality behind the earthly copy has been unveiled for the eye of faith to see now, and for all to see at the end of the age. God has made a new covenant with his people, Jew and Gentile together, a covenant sealed with the blood of the sacrificial lamb, the Lamb that was slain. The sins of God's people have been atoned for through that same blood.

Yes, God is a God of judgment. Yes, he will destroy those who destroy his earth. But at the heart of his purposes lies not judgment but covenant. His purpose is a full heaven not a full hell. Yes, all the nations are in tumult, but his covenant purpose still stands. From these very nations he is redeeming a people for his presence through the blood of the Lamb, a people with whom he will dwell in his kingdom, a realm free from evil and in which his sovereignty is acclaimed and enjoyed.

When we started this series on the trumpets three weeks ago, we saw that trumpets convey three messages as understood against the Old Testament background. The trumpets warned of God's judgments and called to repentance. That's the message of the first six trumpets. They also heralded the coronation of the king. That's the message of the seventh trumpet. But there's more. Seven trumpets leading the ark of the covenant in holy procession brought down the walls of Jericho, the great city which blocked the entrance of God's people into the Promised Land. The seventh trumpet has now unveiled the ark of the covenant. The fall of the great city must be

imminent. We were prepared for the seventh trumpet to be the third woe, but so far the seventh trumpet has been all about rejoicing. But just as the seventh seal encompassed the seven trumpets, so does the seventh trumpet encompass the seven bowls. The seventh bowl brings the collapse of the great city (16:19) and the three-fold pronouncement, "Woe! Woe, O great city" (18:10, 16, 19). With Babylon the great city removed, New Jerusalem the holy city can descend from heaven and the great cry go up, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). Beyond judgment lies the fulfillment of God's covenant.

This vision into the heart of heaven is accompanied by dramatic thunder and lightning. These are phenomena associated with a theophany, with the manifestation of God's presence. They occurred at Mount Sinai when God came down to meet with his people (Exod 19:16-19). They occur four times in Revelation in increasing intensity: during the initial throne room vision (4:5), with the seventh seal (8:5), the seventh trumpet (11:19), and the seventh bowl (16:18). In each case, God makes his presence felt. Whether that presence is good news or bad news depends on whether or not you have been praying for God's kingdom to come.

With the blowing of the seventh trumpet we have reached a great climax. Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Long live the King!

Many people think that Revelation is primarily about the terrible devastation of the Great Tribulation. No, Revelation is primarily about God. Again and again we see into heaven; there at the center is a throne with one seated upon it. He is acclaimed as worthy of worship for he has created all things. There beside him is the Lamb, who also is acclaimed as worthy of worship, but in his case it is because he was slain and has redeemed a people unto God through his own blood. You cannot properly understand God's kingdom unless you see that the one whom he installs as King of kings and Lord of lords is the slain Lamb. Long live this King!

**Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom;
you are exalted as head over all.
Wealth and honor come from you;
you are the ruler of all things...
Now, our God, we give you thanks,
and praise your glorious name. (1 Chr 29:11-13)**

1. M. Eugene Boring, "The Theology of Revelation: The Lord our God the Almighty Reigns," *Interpretation* 40:3 (July 1986): 266.

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