

Crown Casting

Revelation 4 and 5:6

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This morning I want to begin our sermon with one of my favorite stories. It's a story that Al Andrews introduced me to years ago, and I used it as a children's sermon about five years ago. I think it will help us this morning. It's called The Pirate Who Tried to Capture the Moon. [Parts of story are summarized.]

There was once a fierce pirate who loved nothing. He lived alone on an island, where he strode about in armor, waving a broad sword. And he watched for ships to capture. Through his glass, he spied the ship of flowers, with its daffodil flag and its sails of Queen Anne's lace.

And the pirate captured just about every ship you could think of. But each time he'd look up in the sky and see the moon sailing as it pleased. He'd shake his sword and yell, "Some day I'll capture you too!"

And the day finally came. But he couldn't figure out how to catch it.

The pirate paced back and forth in his rusty armor, back and forth, to and fro. He walked in circles, day and night, until he passed an old ship of books he had captured long ago. He searched its broken decks and shredded sails until he found a book that told all about the moon. Then the pirate laughed.

He took that book and six horses and sailed for land. He harnessed the mares to his ship, and he ripped across the earth—he ripped over fields and streams, leaving a scar. Slowly, the pirate who loved nothing moved over the land in his ship, looking for everything the moon loved.

The moon loves to shine through curtains, said the book. It loves to float in pools of water. It likes to peek over small hills. The moon loves poetry.

The pirate slashed curtains from farmhouses and drapes from mansions. He cut curtains from stages and he loaded them all onto his ship. Into barrels he scooped frog ponds and reflecting pools and swimming holes. He chopped at small hills with his sword and shoveled them into his hold.

He captured poets and everything else he knew the moon loved. He swiped candles from the tables of Italian restaurants. He grabbed sadly playing violins from under the chins of gypsies. He kidnaped lovers as they gazed at each other softly, walking hand in hand.

He netted baying wolves, and children who danced all by themselves in the middle of the night. And the pirate sailed that bursting ship back to his island. And he waited. Clouds moved across the sky. The wind blew the empty sea. And finally the moon rose.

Revelation 4:1: *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.”*

“After this.” After *what*? Well, *you* know — the letters to the seven churches, which aren’t *actually* the letters to the seven churches, they are actually the seven dictations to the seven angelos—angels—messengers— of the seven churches, the seven-fold Spirit of God, I think, perhaps in the seven churches.

After *that* — what we’ve been looking at for quite some time now.

But it’s interesting that now in chapter 4 we are first beginning to read what Jesus in chapter 1 says is really addressed to the seven churches. Chapter 1 verse 11 says, “Write what you [John] see . . . and send it to the seven churches”

For the last two chapters John has been dictating for the angels of the seven churches what he has *heard*. Nevertheless, it seems pretty clear that the seven churches are at least expected to overhear what is said to the angels, and they overhear that they have a *lot* of problems and one common challenge: to conquer.

Real and multiple varying needs and problems:

Some need to restore their first love;
Some are facing persecution and death;
there is false doctrine and idolatry,
sexual immorality and a need for church discipline.

Some are dead even though everybody else thinks they’re alive;
Some are doing pretty well even though everybody else thinks they’re dead;
Some are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked, although they think they’re rich and wise.

All of them are called to conquer.

Now I think it is appropriate that we would have a little bit of sympathy for John. John sees himself as their pastor. And what is he supposed to tell them? What is he supposed to say after all of this *need*?

There is a huge variety of need in this room right now. You were listening to the prayer. All kinds of needs and problems, many unspoken, but just like those seven churches. And *I’m* supposed to *preach* to you all?!

What do I say “after this”?—after I see your need?

They had various needs and problems, but they also had one common problem, and it's very likely reflected in the references to the Nicolaitans, Balaam, and the Jezebel woman. It shows up in their confused morality, self-delusions, and apathy.

After the legalism of the Jews, this problem was the first, great, cultural enemy of the early Church. It was called "Gnosticism." Gnostic means literally "one who knows." The Gnostics were the first, major, illegitimate offspring of the early Church, sired by the philosophy of Greece.

It's a rather amorphous idea, but at the core it's the idea that we are saved through *knowing* stuff. Knowledge is the key. All seven churches existed in a sea of Greek ideas . . . the Greek love of "gnosis"—knowledge. Education was savior.

We all exist in a sea of modernist ideas, actually really ancient ideas, but ideas that took our society by storm in the 18th century in what we call now The Enlightenment. It followed the scientific revolution, which was largely (if you study it) a form of Christian worship.

The Enlightenment was in large part a rediscovery of Greek thinking, without the Church worship to mess it up . . . Greek thinkers like Aristotle who fathered Empiricism—objective observation. Aristotle, along with many of the other Greek philosophers, taught that man's (meaning man and woman's) highest function was to think—to reason. To the Greeks, man's crown or glory was his mind.

Many now say that the modern era really began then in 1636 when Rene Descartes said, "Cogito Ergo Sum." "I think, therefore I am." (Start with the thinking man.)

In The Enlightenment then, they just said flat out, "Man is the measure of all things." (Like my daughter's T-shirt which says, "It's all about me.")

I just glossed over about 2,500 years of philosophy and history and put it on my daughter's T-shirt. So you should know that it's more complicated and complex than that. However, I do think we can safely say that the Gnostics and the modernists are pretty much like the pirate who tried to capture the moon . . .

. . . If you want to know the moon, capture it.

. . . Send a man to the moon and get a rock and bring it back.

. . . To know a tree, cut it down and count its rings.

. . . To know a frog, capture it, kill it, and cut it into tiny pieces.

. . . To know a wife . . . we're not that good at knowing wives any more.

What I'm saying is that just like those Gnostic Greeks, we modern people *expect* something in chapter 4, "after this." After all our problems have been pointed out, we expect some practical advise . . . some understandable advise on how we can *conquer* them.

It seems that God is our chief problem, so how can we comprehend God? How can we understand God? How can we make this whole God thing *work*?

This is hard for us modern people to take, but "after this," Revelation chapter 4 verse 1, we are really not *mentioned* as such in the rest of the book. The seven *churches* are really not mentioned as such in the rest of the book.

No instructions; no understandable, practical advise whatsoever!

So we think it must not be about us. In fact, the dominant view in the American church today is that we get raptured out of there at this point. So the rest of The Revelation isn't *about* us.

No instructions *to* us;
therefore, it's really not *about* us,
so it's not *for* us.

And that's kind of strange. Because this is the beginning of the very part of the book that Jesus says is particularly for us. In chapter 1: "[John] write what you see . . . and send it to the seven churches . . ."

Well, maybe it isn't *about* us, meaning *dependent* on us, but it is *for* us, because Jesus said so. And the part we think is *for* us, chapters 2 and 3—the seven churches—the part we understand (do this, do that, repent here, repent there) is technically not *for* us. It's not addressed to us. It's addressed to those seven angelos.

Now for the part that we do not understand, that I am supposed to preach to you:

For a long time, when I would teach The Revelation, like in Youth Group, I would teach up to this point and then stop, saying, "Sorry. I don't understand past here." So many people have come up to me since we started The Revelation and said, "I've never read The Revelation because I don't understand it."

We think it's *so important* to understand. I guess I'm still not sure I *do* understand, but I'm beginning to understand I'm not *supposed* to understand everything! Maybe if I *did* understand, it wouldn't be God.

Because if I *understand* God, I don't know Him.

There are a lot of different ways of knowing, and there are a lot of different things that can be known by them.

This last month I was reading the Reader's Digest. I read about a woman named Nancy, fifty years old, who wanted to introduce her elderly mother to the wonders of the computer and Internet. She went to a popular website called "Ask Jeeves" and said to her elderly mother, "It can answer any question you have."

Her mother was very skeptical. "It's *true*, Mom. Think of something to ask it, and it will have the answer." Nancy sat there poised; her mother began to think. Very seriously, after a time, she responded: "Okay. How is Aunt Helen feeling?"

You see, there are different ways of knowing and different things that can be known by them.

There is one way to know objects and another way to know subjects. There is one way to know computers and facts, and there is another way to know Aunt Helen.

Maybe God is more like Aunt Helen
and less like a computer.

You can conquer, capture, and comprehend things that are less than you. You can measure things that are less than you. But you can't really measure things that are greater than you. So if man is the measure of all things, then you must believe that all things are less than you, and that you're the king of all things. Yet all things in your kingdom are dead.

A world of facts, and none of them worth knowing
like Aunt Helen.

I've heard that if a tribal African wants to *know* something, he dances with it. If a *modern* person wants to know something he captures it, kills it, and cuts it into little, tiny pieces! He reduces it to its basic parts.

If you want to know a tree, cut it down and count its rings.

If you want to know a frog, capture it, kill it, and cut it into little, tiny pieces.

If you want to know a wife . . . well, I *could* capture it, kill it, and cut it into little, tiny pieces . . . sometimes I think I *do* emotionally and spiritually when we fight. But if I did it *completely*, even *physically*, what would that be? — Anatomy and physiology.

I *would* learn about my wife . . . what color her kidneys are . . . something about her liver . . . I would learn *about* my wife, but I would no longer *know* my wife, because she'd be dead! And I'd be a murderer . . . alone.

I wonder if in our lust for understanding God we could murder God. We think, “You can’t *murder* God. That’s a crazy idea!” But maybe we murder Him to *us*. Make Him so entirely understandable that we thereby declare Him dead.

In John 5 John records that Jesus said to the Pharisees and the preachers, “You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have . . . life; [Preachers, you think that in understanding the scriptures you have life.] and it is they that bear witness to me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”

Because they *so* wanted to comprehend God, because they so thought they had *understood* God according to the book, when God showed up in the flesh in front of them, they could not understand Him, they could not know Him, and they killed Him.

Maybe in our lust for understanding God we *did* murder God. We nailed Him to a tree. I think it was the tree of knowledge. And wasn’t that the sin in the Garden?—wanting the knowledge of God more than we wanted to know God? We wanted the conquest of God more than communion with God, like pirates trying to capture the moon.

If Revelation 4:1 is our first step back into the Garden since we left it back in Genesis 3, maybe we had better be prepared to drop the fruit of knowledge we’re clutching so tightly in our hands at the gate . . . in order to know the Maker.

Maybe we should give up *having* to understand in order to *know*. Maybe God doesn’t *want* to be “understood” so much as *known*, like my wife, who wants to be known not captured. If I think I have captured her, comprehended her, understood all of her, she’ll do something to make sure I understand differently. But she wants to be known . . . loved.

When a Hebrew man knew his wife, she oftentimes got pregnant. There are different ways of knowing and different things to be known.

Maybe this explains most of our modern, Gnostic problems with God. We are constantly asking, “How could bad things happen to good people? Surely you’re not telling me that *good people*, like my neighbors who reject Jesus, don’t get into Heaven! How could *that* be?” Maybe good people are like murdering Pharisees, who try to set a trap for God and end up pounding the Son of God to their tree of knowledge.

Remember the pirate who tried to capture the moon? What did he do?

He found a book about the moon, and

he discovered everything the moon liked.
Then he captured all those things the moon liked,
in the hope of setting a trap for the moon
so that he could capture the moon.

The Bible is like a book of all the things God likes. We can read it in such a way
that we hope to then *capture* all the things God likes . . .

A good marriage,
Not drinking so much we get drunk,
Not lying . . .

. . . and then capture God and make Him a jewel in our crown.
I think we modern-day preachers may be the worst . . . so Gnostic and modern . . .
feeling so responsible that we give you all kinds of practical things to *do* . . .
things that we get from Psychology Today and Ann Landers . . . because we can't
find them in Scripture very well.

I mean by practical things "understandable things."

- "Four understandable things you can do to restore first love."
- "Practical advise for the seven churches on how to experience life."
- "How to make God work for you."

I need to say to you that practical, understandable ideas are fine.

But too much,
in the wrong way,
at the wrong place,
and God begins to look more like a computer
and less like Aunt Helen . . .

. . . more like a *thing* to be captured
and less like a *person* to be known.

I was listening to a "Preaching Today" sermon tape from Christianity Today. The
host said something like this: "The sermon you are about to hear is really great
because so and so [the preacher] leaves us with several practical things to do, not
just with the sense that God is great."

I thought about that statement and thought about it and thought about it . . . I think
I really need to say that *I* believe a sense that God is great is pretty much *it*. It's
called faith. And it looks like worship.

From here on out I think John is pretty much going to leave us self-conscious, self-absorbed, needy, sinful, frightened, confused, Gnostic, modern people with an **overwhelming sense that God is really great in every possible way you could ever imagine!**

I think *that*
is what *we*
need most.

Maybe our chief need is to see our needs but then surrender our needs—lose our needs—lose our selves in His greatness. Maybe then it really isn't *about* you! And that's great news. For, in fact, *you* are the chief problem. Maybe the first step and really the *only* step in conquering is being conquered.

Revelation 4:1: *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."*

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.

Surrounding 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. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle.

Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

*"Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come."*

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

After this, John is out-carnated . . . out of here.

He sees a rainbow. In the Old Testament a rainbow is the symbol of God’s covenant of mercy.

He sees seven burning torches that sit on a lampstand. Jesus already told us the lampstand is the Church.

He sees four living creatures, cherubim and seraphim it seems, from Ezekiel and Isaiah. The rabbi said they represent all creation, the strongest, noblest, the wisest, and the swiftest, but we don’t know for sure. They’re not *exactly* like that.

We can’t understand all of that. It’s pictures on top of pictures on top of pictures, loaded with meaning. And space and time are different here. We just cannot comprehend it all. Why is that? Because it’s larger and greater than anything we’ve ever seen.

John sees twenty-four thrones and twenty-four elders, like the twenty-four divisions of priests in the temple. Later we’ll read that the new Jerusalem is built with the twelve apostles and the twelve sons of Israel, together twenty-four.

Everything worships the One on the throne. *Everything worships!* Not *study* but *worship*. If they study, it’s somehow a part of worship. Everyone worships saying “Holy, holy holy . . .” “Holy” loosely translated means: incomprehensible glory.

The elders continuously cast their crowns before Him. And Jesus said pray this way: “Father, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” What are they *always doing* in heaven? — Worshipping . . . casting crowns before Him.

Now if you’re not tracking with what I’m saying, let’s finish reading The Pirate Who Tried to Capture the Moon.

The pirate waited for the moon, and finally the moon rose. . . .

But when it looked down, it saw that everything it loved was gone. So it moved down to look a little closer. And the fierce pirate, sitting on his island, laughed. The moon looked again, but still it saw no curtains, it saw no small hills. So again it came a little closer.

The pirate laughed again, and stood up to sharpen his sword. And the moon looked and saw nothing and came still closer. It looked and looked through streets and in villages and down empty wells. There were no pools of water.

There were no poets, no lonely dancers. So it came closer still.

And the pirate, seeing the moon come lower, yelled out, "Moon! I have captured every ship and everything you love, and now I will capture you!"

Then he threw open the hatch. And the moon saw everything it loved streaming out of the pirate's ship and onto the pirate's island. Kitchen curtains and long candles and violins playing sad music and moody poets and lonely wolves and dancers who danced in the middle of the night. It gave a little sigh and came closer to the island, and the pirate watched. Still the moon drew closer, and the pirate saw it grow.

"I didn't know the moon was quite so big," he thought. And still the moon came down, the moon came down, closer, still closer. And the pirate started to feel afraid. He tore through the book that told all about the moon, but he couldn't find a place that told how big the moon was. And the moon came down, growing larger, larger than the pirate's ship, larger than his island, larger than anything the pirate had ever seen.

The pirate trembled, and he thought, "If I return everything I've captured, that will surely stop the moon." So he cut the saddles and the bits from the wild horses, and the chain from the flowers, and they drifted out to sea. And a shadow passed across the giant moon; it was the birds streaming away.

And still the moon came down. So the pirate freed the madly playing violins and the howling wolves, the poets chanting and the pools bursting from their barrels, and he sent them sailing home.

Moonlight spread over the waves, it covered his empty island. The pirate lifted his trembling sword as the whole sky became the moon....

And then the moon stopped. And waited.

The pirate stared into its light and a wild shiver ran through him like a wave. He forgot about being afraid. He forgot about being fierce. He lowered his sword, he dropped his armor, and he whispered, "Moon, wonderful moon, it is you who have captured me."

And the moon glowed through him and above him. Then, slowly, it started back into the sky, growing smaller, growing distant, until once again it sailed as it pleased. It drifted over the sea and over the island where now there was someone new the moon loved, who loved the moon.

For at that moment, in the middle of the night, the pirate began to dance.

Every good deed in your life must be part of that old pirate's dance, or it is sin. For "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin," wrote Paul. Faith is trusting God's great love for you, and when you do, it looks like worship.

In order to conquer, you must first be conquered. You must first lose your life. You must first surrender your crown.

So what can I say to us, with all of our needs and all of our ferocity and all of our fears and all of our confusion and all of our questions? I can say this: just look at how great our God is.

I can preach the Gospel and you can capture crowns and worship.

I feel that so many of us are struggling to understand and comprehend and analyze our relationship with God and how to make it work. He is saying *stop*. “Stop and behold my incredible, great, amazing, wondrous love for you.”

Cast your crowns. **Stop going to worship to *learn* stuff! Go to worship to worship!** Stop, every moment of every day, behold how great your God is, and surrender your crown—your sovereignty. That could look like a lot of different things . . .

Your hurts
Your fears
Your anxieties
Your dreams
Your control.

Cast your crowns before Him. Do you do that every day? I don’t mean simply as a practical, understandable action step, but as a disposition of the heart, a surrender of the soul. Cast your crowns.

Like the moon in the book, God did come down. And now I need to make this sermon “Christian.” I need to tell you that if the moon actually came down on an old pirate like me, I would be so filled with fear I would drop to the ground shaking, and I would hold onto my heart tighter than I had ever held onto it before. I wouldn’t dance.

The moon, you know, didn’t *actually* come down. But God, who is bigger than the moon, did. And they wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger. The only crown He ever wore on the face of this earth was a crown of thorns they pounded into His head while He hung on a cross dying for you and me. And *He* is the one who shows John the throne.

When John looks again at the throne he sees this (Revelation 5:6): *Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.*

John looks at the throne and sees, right there in the center, somebody he

knows — Jesus, bleeding for him.

We say, “It’s not about you!” That’s a good thing to say. It reminds us it’s not *dependent* on us.

“It’s not about you!”

But look! It’s *all* about you. For the Lamb on the throne is bleeding for you . . . for us.

“It’s all about you . . . in grace.”

“All things are yours and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s,” writes Paul. And God made Christ head over all things for you, the Church (Ephesians 2).

So I believe those seven churches show up all over The Revelation, it’s just that they show up by grace, so we don’t recognize them. I believe they are somehow in those twenty-four elders on the twenty-four thrones. And what are they doing? — Naturally, automatically, and continuously they cast their crowns before Him, not because some preacher says they ought to do it, but because it’s their chief joy in life.

Continuously.

And now before we leave it might be helpful to ask a question. How do they get their crowns back on?

You *do know*, I hope, that I’m not saying we can’t understand *anything* about God. I’m just saying we can’t understand anything about God unless He chooses to reveal it to us—give it to us. That’s called grace through revelation. When we get it, it looks like worship. Just like we can’t *do* any good deed for God except for what God does *in* us by His Spirit . . . by grace. And that looks like faith.

You see, I’m saying that according to Scripture God is the one who crowns us. You can read it in the Psalms and other places. He crowns us with His glory through mercy and grace. He crowns us and we cast our crowns before Him.

So, you see, John must have seen an amazing picture. God, the one on the throne, must have been crowning them. And they cast their crowns before Him. And a Lamb crowned them, and they case their crowns before Him.

Crowned them,
Cast them before Him;
Crowned them,
Cast them before Him . . .

Meanwhile the heavenly choir is singing, “Holy, holy, holy . . .”

Crowned . . .
Cast . . .

It must have looked like some wild and crazy *dance!* And it *is*. I believe it's the dance of love that lies at the very heart of God's creation. And *that* dance is *life*. We begin to live *now*, even *here*, when we begin to worship.

Think of yourself and your crowns—your sovereignty. It can look like . . .

Fear
Anxiety
Pride
Arrogance
Confusion.

Your sovereignty can look like a million different problems. And it can sometimes even look like *good* things; things God gives us, like His righteousness and goodness. But even that is a gift from Him. So

say thank you. And cast your crowns before Him. Humble yourself and let Him do what He wants.

[Music]

By way of benediction, “after this,” when you're feeling frightened, when you're feeling confused, when you're feeling entirely occupied with yourself . . . you don't understand and you don't know how you're going to make it . . . you don't know how the whole thing's going to work, listen for a voice. He's whispering, “Come up here.” He speaks through all those things.

Cast your crowns before Him. *Worship* and forget . . .
yourself,
your problems,
your cares,
your needs.

Lose yourself.

You may say, “But what about all my needs and all my cares and all my worries?” I don't know. I don't know that *I* understand either. “What might happen to me?” You might die. Just like they're going to die in Smyrna. But if you're with Jesus, you won't stay here.

When you humble yourself, I have it on good authority that He likes to pick you up and exalt you. Every time God appears in Scripture people freak out and fall down. Then He touches them. That's *Jesus*.

Bending down on the Mount of Transfiguration and touching John.
Bending down in chapter 1 and touching John, saying, "Get up, John. I
have a crown for you."

So "after this," worship all the time. In Jesus' name, Amen.