

5. Heaven and the Throne of God (Revelation 4)

The Vision of Heaven (Revelation 4:1)

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."

This begins the third main section of the Revelation. John's attention moves away from what is happening in the church as it exists and survives on earth and focuses on heaven and what is and will happen there. The voice that John first heard expresses the purpose of this part of the Revelation: "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." John at once is in the spirit—not an attitude or frame of mind but the becoming of an actual part of the vision. The voice commanded, "Come up here." The place where John was going was up. The vision itself unfolds before John. Paul expressed a similar experience:

12:1 . . . I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-God knows. 3 And I know that this man-whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows- 4 was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. 2 Cor 12:1-4.

"After this" indicates events, the main of which will have their consummation at the revelation of the Lord in the last day. It is not general events in sequence that follow, but rather a series of visions, the events of which parallel one another. For example, the vision turns immediately to a view of heaven and the "Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come. (Revelation 4:8)"

The Throne in Heaven (Revelation 4:2-6)

2 At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. 3 And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. 4 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. 5 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. 6 Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

John saw the throne and someone sitting on it. We will arrive at the revelation of the Lord to the sound of a trumpet:

- They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. 31 And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. Matt 24:30-31.
- 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 1 Cor 15:52-53.
- 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 1 Thess 4:16-17.

At that last trump, the unveiling of the throne in heaven will be upon us. And we too will see "that throne in heaven with someone sitting on it." At the end of the previous chapter, the Lord spoke of God's throne: "21 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne." Rev 3:21-22. The one who sat had the appearance of jasper and carnelian (sardius)—stones that represent the brilliance of God. These

stones were the first and last stones of the high priest breastplate (Exodus 39:8-13); however, a clearer understanding is in the description of the bride of the Lamb where the brightness of the gems directly connects to the brilliance of God:

"Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. Rev 21:9-11

A rainbow encircled the throne. The rainbow is used twice in the Bible to describe God and once to describe the Son of God: "28 Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking." Ezek 1: 28. Of the son of God, John wrote, "10:1 Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow [In the Greek text, this indefinite article *a* is the definite article *the*, indicating the same rainbow used to describe God.] above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars." Rev 10:1-2.

The scene is one of beauty, majesty, and power: lightning, rumblings, and thunder. The seven lamps are the sevenfold spirit of God as in Rev 1:4-5: "Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne." These are not lamps as in *lampstands*. These lamps are blazing. Luke described the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost as tongues of fire in Acts 2:3. In Acts 2:16, Peter related this event directly to the outpouring of the Spirit of God.

Therefore, here we have God on his throne and his Holy Spirit blazing before his throne. Revelation 5:6 will reveal the Lamb in whom dwells the fullness of the Godhead (Col. 2:9): "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."

All of this is set on what looked like a sea of glass. They were covered with eyes and could see all around. Other passages or visions where the Lord appeared confirm the meaning of this expanse, called here the sea of glass:

- 9 Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up 10 and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. Ex 24:9-10.
- 22 Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice, and awesome. Ezek 1:22.
- 21 The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass. Rev 21:21.

The Four Living Creatures (Revelation 4:6-8)

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. 7 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. 8 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."*

In the center around the throne were four living creatures. These living creatures were like a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. Jewish secular history alleges that the four leading tribes of Israel each had one of these figures on the standard as they marched forth:

The Jewish writers tell us, that the standard of each tribe of Israel took the color of the stone which represented it in the high priest's breastplate, and that there was worked upon each a particular figure—a lion for Judah, a young ox for Ephraim, a man for Reuben, and an eagle for Dan. (from *The Apocalypse: Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1998 by BibleSoft)

Numbers 2 describes the arrangement of the tribes for battle. In Ezekiel 1, Ezekiel had a vision in which he saw four living creatures before the throne of God: "10 Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. 11 Such were their faces. Ezek 1:10-11. In Ezek 10:15-16, Ezekiel clearly identified the living creatures as cherubim: "15 Then the cherubim rose upward. These were the living creatures I had seen by the Kebar River." Cherubim are winged, heavenly creatures ordinarily described as worshiping and serving God. In verse 8, they are worshiping God.

The angels of heaven are thus included in the revealing of the Lamb. Our god is their God; our Lord is their Lord. The adverse is also true; their enemy is our enemy. Therefore, they worship our God as Lord God Almighty. The elders lay their crowns aside (humility before the Almighty) and join the worship.

The Twenty-four Elders (Revelation 4:9-11)

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, 10 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:

*11 "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."*

The twenty-four elders sitting on thrones indicate a responsibility of governance. Jesus promised a throne to his immediate followers in Matt 19:28-29: "28 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." The Holy Spirit of God made elders in the church overseers:

28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Acts 20:28-31

Paul gave special importance to certain elders in 1 Tim 5:17-18: "17 The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching."

They were dressed in white, which agrees with the commands to the seven churches in Revelation 3:4: "4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy;" Revelation 3:5: "He who overcomes will, like them, be

dressed in white;" and in Revelation 3:18: "18 I counsel you to buy from me . . . white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."

Peter promised elders crowns when the Chief Shepherd appears in 1 Peter 5:1-4:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Whoever the elders are, they are by definition older—perhaps the first appointed to serve. Paul described the early church as the firstfruits:

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Rom 8:22-23.

The elders are present as John witnessed the great multitude of the saved from the tribulation (Rev 7:11-12). They were also present at the destruction of Babylon (Rev 19:4-5).

The elders also have been raised at the coming of the Lord, for even the apostles eagerly await that day: "8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." 2 Tim 4:8.

From this point forward, we must think of John as an observer of the day of the Lord and not a participant. He will see the elders here and the resurrection there, but they are all a part of the great day of the Lord: "12 'Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.'" Rev 22:12.

The elders' song praises the God, Almighty of all creation:

11 "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."

This song repeats the teaching of Paul among the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of Athens and emphasizes once again the theme of the Revelation: God, Almighty is the alpha and omega, and no other can or will be. Paul taught in Acts 17:24-28:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 "For in him we live and move and have our being."

Thus, John, and we through him, begins to see the wonder and splendor of God revealed to us. The singular nature of this view of God, Almighty, cannot be altered by philosophy or theology or speculative theories.