

## Studies in Revelation

### The Vision of the Throne Room in Heaven 4:1-11

*Introduction:* This morning we are going to be in Rev. 4, picking up with where we left off last Spring. We have finished up the messages Jesus sent to the seven churches in Asia Minor (chapters 2 and 3), and now we come to a major transition in the book. There are two important things to consider as we start with chapter four. First of all, we are leaving earth as it were and focusing on what is going on in heaven. The setting of chapters 1 – 3 was real, historical events that took place about 2,000 years ago on a small island in the Mediterranean Sea. Now we are changing locations. John has a vision of heaven and what goes on up there.

The second major thing that changes with chapter four is that we are jumping headfirst into apocalyptic literature. What we are going to do this morning is similar to something our family did several years ago. We had all met in the mountains of Northern Georgia to do some whitewater rafting. It was serious rafting, and the section of the river just above where we put in was the course used in the Summer Olympics when they were held in Atlanta several years ago. Before we got in the water, we had about an hour of instruction, and the instructor told us there were five different categories of rapids, with category one being nothing spectacular, and category 5 being stuff you didn't want to get involved in as a beginner. Of course, we all wanted to know what kind of rapids we were going to be in, and he told us they were primarily category 3, several 2's, and one category 4.

As an incentive to really pay attention to what he was telling us, he told us that once we got our raft in the water, we had about a 30 second drift, and then we hit the only category 4 rapid on the river. So we paid attention, at least most of us did. So we got to point of departure and took off, and sure enough, right there in front of us was foaming, spraying, roaring series of rapids, and we hit them! In the raft beside us, there was a guy who wasn't prepared, or either didn't listen closely enough about how to keep one leg wedged beneath the support, but when their raft hit the rapid, he got tossed out of the raft. And he wasn't a little guy, either. I'm sure he weighed well over 300 lbs., and he got tossed. When he passed us going through the rapids, he was tumbling around yelling, "I'm hit, I'm hit." And sure enough, he had been slammed back first into a rock and was seriously injured enough to have to have medical personnel come get him.

This morning, that is what we are doing with apocalyptic literature. We have been floating placidly through three chapters of easy to interpret, literal history – and bam! We're right in the middle of this highly symbolic style of literature. How many of you remember our definition of apocalyptic literature? *"The communication of a vision using spectacular imagery, designed to move the recipient beyond his current situation and into a transcendent reality (apocalyptic literature is designed to broaden the reader's perspective and help him see reality) which results in a reversal that makes heavenly mysteries real, and the earthly situation temporary."*

So as we start reading chapter four, you'll see this "highly symbolic" literature that is full of "spectacular imagery," and as we go through the verses, our objective is to discover the "transcendent realities." Now, this brings up our three planks. Do you remember the three planks I shared with you in that first message? The first

was that there is no doctrinal issue in the book of Revelation that you have to believe in order to be genuinely saved. The second was that we were dealing with a unique type of literature, that of apocalyptic. And the third plank was that as we went through the book, we were going to focus on the big picture, not the incidentals. In other words, we are in search of transcendent realities that will move our focus from the world, which is temporary, to heaven, which is eternal. So with that brief re-introduction to Revelation, let's start reading in chapter four.

*After this (a reference to the first three chapters and the messages John sent to the seven churches) I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet (1:10 – “I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet . . .), said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."*

Now the fact that the voice said “*after this*” would indicate that the events of chapters four through the end of the book haven't taken place yet – they are still all in the future. I say that with a little bit of hesitation because there are some things a little later on in the book that do seem to me like they have already occurred (primarily chapter 12 that deals with the woman and the dragon and Satan being thrown down to earth). But generally speaking, what we have in the rest of the book is all future events.

<sup>2</sup> At once I was in the Spirit (*some state of ecstasy, he was still physically on the island of Patmos*), and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.<sup>3</sup> And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.

So the first thing John is shown in his vision is a throne in heaven. That is hugely important, and we'll come back to it at the end of the message. Out of all the things God could have revealed to John, He starts with a throne. And curiously enough, John doesn't identify who it is on the throne. The presumption is that his readers will immediately know who he talking about. But if we go down to verse 11 we read that everyone around the throne falls down in worship and says, *"Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power."*

So John sees God on the throne, note how he describes the appearance of God. He compares Him to two jewels, jasper and carnelian. We're not completely certain what jasper is, but it was probably a diamond or an opal. Carnelian has been identified, and it is a brilliant red gem. But then John throws another color at us, he tells us that there is a rainbow "around" the throne (NAS). Interestingly enough, the word translated as "around" is also used to describe a halo. This is why some translations say that *"around the throne was a halo as brilliant as an emerald."* Or as the NIV says, *"there was a rainbow that encircled the throne."*

But what is John telling us about God by describing Him as jewels and colors? There has been lots of time given to discover the significance of these two gems, and they say the white, or clear color of the jasper shows us God's purity, the deep red of the carnelian shows us God's judgment, and the green of the rainbow shows us God's mercy. On the other hand, it could be that John was simply finding a way to describe God in his resplendent beauty and radiance. One of the things we know about diamonds is that when light hits on, it is refracted and all kinds of beautiful colors come out of it, so it could be that is what John saw. Paul tells us in

1 Tim. 6:16 that God “*dwells in unapproachable light,*” so it could be that John was simply describing God’s brilliant, blinding majesty.

<sup>4</sup> Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.

Again, there is a lot of opinion about who these 24 elders are. They are also mentioned in chapters 5, 11, and 18, but are they angelic beings, or human beings (the two basic theories)? There is a fair amount of evidence that would indicate they are humans, and there is an equally compelling amount of evidence that would indicate they are angelic beings. I’m not going to overwhelm you with the evidence for each position, but I will tell you that whatever they are, they are characterized by righteousness and royalty. We see the righteousness in that they are clothed in white (we’ll develop this thought later in the book), and we see their royal status in that they are all wearing crowns.

Something else we are introduced to in this verse is the use of numbers in apocalyptic literature. What is the significance of 24? Are we to take it literally or figuratively? We could probably benefit from an entire message on how to understand the use of numbers in apocalyptic literature, but for now let me just say that the significance of 24 is probably that it represents both Old and New Testament saints. We know that in the OT there were 12 tribes in the nation of Israel, and in the NT there were 12 apostles, so when you put that together you have the number 24. So if these 24 elders are humans who have died and gone to heaven, they would represent all the saints, both Old and New Testament who worship God in heaven.

Now starting in verse 5, we get to some celestial phenomena emanating from the throne.

<sup>5</sup> From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, <sup>6</sup> and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

What John is doing here is drawing our attention back to the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. In Ex. 19 we read

<sup>16</sup> On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup> Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. <sup>19</sup> And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

This is the imagery John is drawing on in our passage, and everything about the scene conveys power and mystery and fear. The crack of lightning and the deep rumbling thunder and fire and smoke and when you are in an environment like that, you're probably shaking in your boots! What's the point of that? Well, here we see atmospheric phenomena reminding us of how small and insignificant and weak we really are in the presence of an awesome God. This is why John draws our attention to a "*sea of glass, like crystal*" stretching out before the throne. This shows us the vastness of God. When we were in NC, we were standing on the Eastern side of an Island right off the coast, and as we looked out, we saw nothing but

ocean. There was nothing for thousands of miles, and it makes you feel very small! That is John's point is telling us about the sea of glass.

What we have going on here is that John is setting the stage for a heavenly worship service. Have you ever wondered what worship is going to look like in heaven? These verses describe the object of worship, and tell us that there are going to be some significant sensory elements. I can't wait!

Now starting in the last half of verse six, we get into some interesting creatures.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: <sup>7</sup> the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. <sup>8</sup> And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within,

Note the placing of these creatures in relation to the throne. The idea is that they encircle the throne, one in front, one behind, and one on each side. The fact that they are full of eyes (the text mentions it twice) probably represents continual vigilance. Nothing escapes their attention. This attribute is going to come into play later in the book as we see that the four living creatures are strongly linked to God's vengeance against sin. Nothing can escape their notice.

And again, there is lots of speculation about the significance of the four types of creatures – the lion, the ox, the man, and the eagle. Of the six or seven different major theories, the one I lean toward is that it could be that out of all animate creation, four are being singled out: the noblest, the strongest, the wisest,

and the fastest. We aren't completely sure of their significance, but it seems to me like John is letting us know that it isn't only humans who worship God. You have to remember that the creation we live in now is fallen – it has been marred by sin. There is a sense in which it has been repressed and restricted, and one day it will be restored to its original condition, and it could look like C. S. Lewis portrays it in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. What we are sure about concerning these creatures that John sees is that they look like a combination of the cherubim of Ezekiel and the seraphim of Isaiah. The Bible doesn't tell us a whole lot about these two orders of angelic beings, but from what we see in this chapter is that they are the beings nearest to the throne of God. That's important.

And the other thing we know about them is that they lead the hosts of heaven in worship. We see this in verses 9 and 10. When they worship the One on the throne, it is at that point that the 24 elders join in worship by bowing down and casting their crowns before the throne.

We see what that worship consists of in verses 8b – 11.

and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" <sup>9</sup> And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, <sup>10</sup> the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, <sup>11</sup> "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."



I have several questions I want to leave you with to chew on for the next two weeks. The first is, “What is the significance of starting this major section of the book with a picture of heaven, and in particular, the throne room in heaven?” This is a major point of practical application, it had tremendous significance to the original audience, and it will minister to our hearts as well.

The second question to think about has to do with the worship in heaven. This chapter is our first glimpse into what it looks like. I believe that is instructive. What are the worshippers talking about? Who are they focusing on? Are they celebrating what God has done for them, or are they extolling God for who He is? So give some thought to this scene of heavenly worship, and next time we are together, we will start by making some practical application from these two points.