

THE THRONE OF GOD: Revelation chapter 4 (NIV)
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*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 ruby. A rainbow that shone like 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. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.*

*In the centre, 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 its 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, honour 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 honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."*

Have you ever read, or tried to read, the book of Revelation? You probably made sense of chapter one, even with its unusual vision of Jesus at the end. You were probably comfortable with most of the message to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. But what of the four living creatures of chapter 4, or the four horsemen of chapter 6, or the 144,000 of chapters 7 and 14, or the beast and the red dragon with seven heads and 10 horns, or Babylon the mother of prostitutes, or the bottomless pit, or the mysterious number 666, which someone suggested had 666 explanations! If you are like most people, you probably concluded that Revelation is a strange even a bizarre book. Once you go beyond chapter 3, you are in deep water. Many churches skip over from chapter 3 to chapter 21! Yet this unique book is as fascinating as it is mystifying and perplexing. In many ways it picks up themes from Genesis, and brings them into focus. In this last book of the Bible, God pulls back the curtain of the future to give his people a glimpse of his plan of salvation in human history, plans that centre on the Lord Jesus Christ.

For most Christians, the book of Revelation is one of the least read books of the Bible, and the most difficult to understand in the NT. Many find it unintelligible; it seems to obscure more than it reveals. There are several reasons for this. First, we are not familiar with its picture language: its symbolic language, numerical symbols, and strange visions and imagery. As ancient literature, it is difficult for the modern mind to understand. Second, we are unfamiliar with the historical context of John's world of the first century Roman Empire, with its emperor worship and intense persecution of Christians. When believers refused to confess "Caesar is Lord", they were considered disloyal to the state and persecuted. Third, Revelation has more references to the OT than any other NT book, references that we may not understand; one estimate is over 300!

Furthermore, no book of the Bible has been subject to so many conflicting interpretations as this one. Many godly scholars have their different explanations. There are four main ways of interpreting this book and each has many subdivisions. Yet this book offers us insight, encouragement and challenge like almost no other book in the Bible. It is God's message to us, coming with a pastoral heart and prophetic insight from the apostle John, in exile for his faith in Christ. He writes to encourage the faithful to stand firm against persecution and compromise. God's Word must address the people to whom it was originally written, the

seven churches of modern day Turkey, and also be a living word to every age.

There are four different views regarding the chronological order in which the events take place, as well as the meaning of these events. Moreover, which events are literal and which are symbolic or figurative? Beware of commentators who claim absolute knowledge about every small detail of Revelation. Read Revelation with a humble mind and be ready to change your views. Reading it has its dangers. Get too involved with it, and you risk becoming unbalanced. Get the calculator out, and you risk ending up with predicting precise dates for the end of the world, and living to explain your mistakes! Handle this book of prophecy with care: *“I warn everyone who hears the words of the **prophecy** of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of **prophecy**, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll”* (22:18-19).

I favour an approach that avoids the most popular view, often promoted by celebrity televangelists, and try to combine the strengths of all four interpretations. It seems to me that Revelation sweeps over the entire Church Age from Christ’s first coming to his second coming, covering the same ground from a variety of aspects, in parallel sections. For example, the ground covered in chapters 4-7 is repeated in chapters 8-11, and then again in chapters 12-14. Each parallel passage adds another layer to build up a complete picture. Revelation repeats its story patterns or picture patterns again and again, in different ways, in order to impress them on us.

Despite the debate surrounding this book, this much is clear: God is sovereign, ultimately God will win, the persecution of believers is certain, but God will never abandon his people, Christ will definitely return and fulfil all of God’s promises. Believers will be vindicated when Christ returns. Without the return of Christ, the resurrection of all the dead, the judgment and justice of God, the Kingdom of God remains a hope and a dream. We should always be ready, since Christ could return at any time: *“Amen! Come Lord Jesus!”* (22:20). This echoes the prayer of the early church, *“Our Lord, come!”* (1 Cor. 16:22). John wants his readers of every age, and in all circumstances, to have confidence in the ultimate victory of the risen Christ.

Blessed are those who hear and obey this prophecy: *“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near”* (1:3). The message of Revelation and its blessing can be received only if hearing is accompanied by obedience as well. Biblical prophecy involves not only future events, but also moral and spiritual encouragement and warnings. It includes both prediction of the future and proclamation of God’s truth for the present.

John received the seven letters to the seven churches *“in the Spirit”* (1:10), i.e. in a trance or in a heightened spiritual experience. He found himself a second time *“in the Spirit”* (2), and he was caught up in a vision and carried as through an open door in the sky into heaven. Heaven is home to God. There he caught a glimpse of the glory and majesty of God seated upon his throne. He does not give a precise description of God’s features. At this point in Revelation it seems like we are leaving earthly realities behind and going on an otherworldly journey. This powerful vision of heaven underlines that God alone is worthy of praise and worship. His majesty, power and holiness extends from eternity past to eternity yet to come. God is on the throne of history. Heaven is the ultimate reality. This world is the shadow, the “shadow-lands” of C. S. Lewis. Here on earth we do not see the whole story and we are prone to forget who is in control.

What an overwhelming experience this must have been for John! He can hardly describe the brilliance of the throne. This is an encounter with the glory and majesty of the true and living God. How can he tell us what it is like? We are leaving the familiar world of earthly experience and entering a strange world of thrones, elders, beasts and angels. It is a world full of life, colour and noise, overwhelming our senses. Imagine the sights, sounds and sensations, of this scene of heavenly worship! We are drawn into the praise and glory due to God. However, John gives no description of God, except for the beauty of precious jewels, jasper, carnelian, emerald and gold, to give us a sense of colour and splendour.

John was allowed to see spiritual and heavenly realities, but he struggled to describe what he saw. John records a vision of God similar to that seen by Moses (Exodus 19), by Isaiah (6:5) and by Ezekiel (1:26-28). God is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, and invisible. Since he dwells in “unapproachable light” and is one “whom no one can see or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16), he is described by the reflected brilliance of precious stones. The jasper stone was clear or translucent, the carnelian was blood red, the rainbow was green, and the lightning flashes were yellow-white. These colours are usually understood as symbolic descriptions of God’s character with the white representing purity or holiness, red judgment, and the emerald rainbow mercy. This visual picture states that the God who rules the universe is a God of holiness, justice and mercy. The crystal sea provided a mirror like reflection of the heavenly scene, adding to its splendour. The “sea of glass” (6) appears in visions of God’s throne room (Exodus 24:10; Ezekiel 1:22, 26; Rev. 15:2).

How may we best explain these symbols and powerful imagery? The book of Revelation uses repeated patterns of symbolic numbers. For example, the number seven occurs over 50 times. In chapter one churches, lamps, stars, and spirits all appeared in groups of seven. In chapter four there are twenty-four elders, four living creatures, and another group of seven lamps and seven spirits (5). Seven symbolises fullness, completion or perfection, just as ‘to sail the seven seas’ means to travel all the oceans of the world. There are four living creatures. They are symbolic of the created world. There are compass points, north, south, east, and west, the four corners of the earth, and the four winds of heaven. The angels who stand at earth’s corners and restrain the winds are also four in number (7:1). The symbolism of twelve refers to God’s people: Jesus said to his 12 disciples, “Truly I tell you, 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” (Matthew 19:28). This symbolism suggests the future restoration of Israel.

John’s prophetic vision symbolizes mysterious unseen spiritual realities. For John’s readers this is a blending of two familiar worlds. First, there is the world of the OT. The centre of the vision was a throne; the word occurs 10 times in this chapter. A throne is a symbol of rule and government. God is on the throne of history. The future belongs to God. The heavenly throne room of God is the heavenly equivalent of the holy of holies in the earthly sanctuary of the OT tent of meeting and the later temple in Jerusalem. The trumpet that announced the Temple worship calls John (1). The same Spirit that lifted Ezekiel to see the One on the throne (1:26-28) does the same for John (2). Jewels from Exodus 28 (3) accompany the rainbow from Genesis 9, the story of the flood. The thunder and lightning of mount Sinai draw him to the seven lamps of Zechariah 4 (5) and the sea of glass from Solomon’s Temple (6; 1 Kings 7:23). The seven lamps picture the blazing power of the Spirits of God.

The four living creatures appear frequently in the heavenly scene. They combine features of the OT seraphim of Isaiah 6:1-3, and the cherubim of Ezekiel 10:14. They have six wings and are full of eyes. They are always found near the throne and the Lamb constantly praising and worshipping God. John points out their different forms: lion, ox, man and eagle. They stand for the greatness and beauty of God’s creation. God is the God of every living creature and the entire cosmos will pay him homage. In Ezekiel 1, the four living creatures are identified as cherubim, angelic beings who are close to God and guard his holiness: “They never stop saying: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is and is to come” (8). They continually praise the holiness, omnipotence and eternity of God. Their many eyes tell us that God’s throne is a place where all is revealed. It reminds us of Jesus’ teaching that one day all hidden things will be revealed (Mark 10:26).

This heavenly reality is intertwined with a second world familiar to its first readers, that of the Roman Empire, and the compulsory worship of its emperor. Seated on 24 thrones around God’s throne were 24 angelic beings who help God administer his universe: “In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him” (Psalm 89:7; cf Isaiah 24:23; 1 Kings 22:19). They are a counterpart to the elders in Israel (Exodus 24:9-11). The symbolism of twelve appears frequently in the book of Revelation. The 24 elders are symbolic of God’s people in every age; the symbolic number 24

comprises 12 OT tribes and 12 NT apostles. These two groups are brought together in the new Jerusalem: *“It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”* (21:12–14). They suggest that God shares his reign with his faithful servants as a kingdom of priests all together. Here the city elders dress in white, which is suggestive of righteousness, and bow down to their admired ruler, casting their crowns, and hailing him with praises. The white robes represent purity and the crowns their victory.

It is the Creator God who deserves this honour, not any human ruler (9-11). God is the source of all power and majesty, and all praise rightly belongs to him: *“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”* (11). The point of this entire chapter is summed up in this verse. All creatures in heaven and earth praise and honour God because he is the creator and sustainer of everything. No king or emperor can make such a claim. No Roman emperor could ever be acknowledged for creating heaven and earth. This role belongs to God alone: *“Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water”* (14:7). If anyone makes such a claim, they are usurping God’s rightful place, and are setting themselves up against him. The boastful claims of the Roman Caesars to have absolute power are exposed as false, as blasphemy, and as idolatry.

The phrase “you are worthy” was used to announce the entrance of an emperor in his procession of triumph. Later, the emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) added the phrase “our Lord and God” as a reference to himself, thereby promoting the cult of emperor worship. Christians, however, acknowledge only one Lord and God. Earthly honour and power one day will be laid before God’s throne, just as the living creatures do in heaven. Ultimately, everyone will submit to the authority of the Lord Jesus: *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Phil. 2:9-11). All authority and honour belong to God. He delegates his authority to others, but it belongs to him.

While the OT psalms are our hymnbook, Revelation is our worship manual, as it reveals heavenly scenes of worship. At the centre of this vision is the total adoration of worship. Worship means “ascribe worth”. The throne room is alive with spontaneous, not commanded, adoration. Worship is an open door into God’s presence. The writer of Hebrews says, *“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”* (4:16). The encouragement to “draw near” to God’s throne implies that Christians have the privilege of a personal relationship with God.

The book of Revelation gives priority to worship as the means by which we can go beyond the brokenness and despair of our world, be renewed in faith, hope and love, and enjoy a deeper sense of God’s presence. Praise is a way of saying “Thank you” to God. Songs of praise and adoration strengthen our faith, encourage our hearts, deepen our vision of God, and focus on the God who is the answer to our problems. Do we make the time to engage regularly in similar uninhibited praise with God’s people?

John’s vision of God’s heavenly throne gave him hope in the lonely days of his exile on the island of Patmos. Today God is still with us in hard times. The situations we face will never limit God’s grace and power. Imagine the effect this vision must have had on the struggling persecuted believers of John’s day with their hardship and suffering. Despite all appearances, God was still supreme. We know the future belongs to God. What effect does this vision have on you in your circumstances today?

The key word in this chapter, and throughout Revelation, is “throne”. No matter what may happen on earth, God is on his throne and he is in complete control. Various teachers interpret Revelation in different ways, but all agree that John is emphasizing the glory and sovereignty of God. What an encouragement that would

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