

The revelation of Jesus Christ

Lesson # 14 A Visit to Heaven Revelation 4:1-6a

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¹After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ²At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³And 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. ⁴Around 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. ⁵From 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, ⁶and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

Introduction

Seven times in the last 2 chapters, Jesus gave the churches this message: "To him who conquers (or overcomes) I will give..." followed by a promise of some future blessing. It is no coincidence that these letters are now followed by chapters 4 & 5 which provide us with scenes of heavenly worship & a God who is in full control of all the goings on in His vast created universe.

I. John's Call to Heaven

v. 1

As we leave the letters to the 7 churches behind, we now encounter a chapter which reveals to us glorious scenes that we'll find hard to comprehend, because they are beyond comparison in our own experience. As well, we'll run into a couple of real interpretive challenges – such as: is verse 1 a picture of the Rapture of the church? Who are the 24 elders on 24 thrones? As we move into scenes of the heavenly realm, it becomes clear by chapter 5 that John is no longer seeing things occurring in AD 95, but is a witness to future events which have not yet even occurred in our lifetime. It is quite likely that chapter 4 is also future. In fact, v. 1 immediately clues us in that what John will be shown is "what must take place after this." ①

The focus of both of these chapters is first & foremost the throne & the One seated on it. Chapter 4 centers on God the Creator who will deliver a scroll (which becomes the focus once it makes its' appearance) & in chapter 5, the Lamb (Christ) will command our attention, as the only One in the entire universe worthy to have this scroll delivered into His hand, and then to open it.

Verse 1 begins with "After this" – a phrase used a number of times in Revelation to introduce a new section. Here, it is not a continuation of the 1st section where Christ walked among the 7 lampstands which symbolized the churches, but this is a brand new locus – a scene in the very throne room of God.

John looked and noticed a door open in heaven. The word "behold" here calls special attention to the door, and apparently this door is set open in the sky, allowing John entrance into it. This access door is not the same vision as the heavens being opened in MT. 3:16 or Acts 7:56; 10:11; or 11:5, but the function of this door is solely to get John

into heaven where he will spend almost the entirety of the remainder of this book, with the possible exception of Rev. 10:11-11:15.

Again, as he had in Rev. 1:10, John hears that same voice like a trumpet telling him to “Come up here”. There are weak arguments against it, but this is undoubtedly the voice of Jesus Christ calling John up to heaven. It is loud, clear and commands authority & the attention of the one who hears it.

This verse is often used as an argument for the rapture, but John’s movements here do not really fit the pattern of a type and are not meant to convey that messageⁱ. John’s body is apparently not transported to heaven during these scenes but it has remained on Patmos while his spirit (cf. “in the spirit” – 1:10; 4:2) is being given these visions.

“These things that must take place”, is an indicator that these events about to be unfolded before John are fixed and certain, not just probable, but absolutely planned and decreed to take place by God Himself. Robert Thomas comments here:
“Underlying every prophecy is the reality of God’s hand in history. These predictions are not designed to satisfy human curiosity about the future, but to remind mankind of who is in control.”ⁱⁱ

These things will take place after this, IOW, after the course of events just shown to John in the letters to the 7 churches. There is no timeline given for how soon after “these things” or “this” is being depicted. It could be immediately after, but is more likely, given the context of certain parts of the rest Revelation, many years into the future. Antichrist, the False Prophet and the horrific judgments have not yet made their appearances, even by 2010.

II. The Throne & the One On It

vv. 2-3

John is immediately transported “in the spirit” to God’s throne room in heaven. As already mentioned, it is likely that John’s physical body still remains on Patmos as these scenes unfold, but all of his senses are fully activated to see things, hear sounds, smell things and feel things, and certainly he can still think. It is also likely that John returned to a normal state of being after the 1st visions and now has been summoned into that ecstatic state of being “in the spirit” again.

“Behold a throne standing in heaven...”. This throne is the central figure in the room which John finds himself in. It is of indescribable beauty and God Himself is the prominent Being as He sits on this magnificent throne.

This throne room merges with & is related to God’s Temple throughout Revelation – cf. 7:15; 11:19 - & was part of the heavenly temple as indicated by the presence of the Golden Altar of Incense & the Ark of the Covenant in 8:3; 11:19. Everything that will go on in Revelation with regard to the judgments will emanate from this throne. The throne is prominent throughout Revelation & is mentioned in all but 6 chaptersⁱⁱⁱ. The word “throne” is used 37 times in Revelation. The main point of the throne in chapter 4 is that it is emblematic of God’s sovereign & divine exercising of His judgments.

The One seated on this throne is God the Father. We know this as a result of the distinction made between Himself, the Lamb and the Holy Spirit in Rev. 5:5,7; 6:16; 7:10 & 4:5 and note 19:4. John does not name Him, likely as a result of the Hebrew

tradition of not saying God's name out of reverence for His person and His awesome presence. He is sitting not because He is at rest, but on this throne He is reigning – this is in fact an anthropomorphic view depicting God at work in His full authority and power. He is depicted throughout this book as “the One who sits on the throne”.

In v. 3, John now attempts to describe the One he sees on the throne and what the throne itself looks like. The One on the throne “had the appearance of jasper & carnelian. Jasper stone as we identify it today is dull and opaque, and there is uncertainty what it might have looked like in ancient times. It is likely that jasper in this scene depicts a clear, brilliant, sparkling crystalline stone like a diamond. A carnelian or sardius is a fiery red stone, usually used to engrave gems. The suggested symbolism of these stones hints at judgment by water & fire, symbolic of God's holiness, justice and severity. In other places, where God is shown as coming in judgment, (Ezek. 1-4; 8:2; Dan. 7:9) the striking feature is Him as a glowing metallic colour. John's description here is short, possibly due to John's overwhelmed senses and the fact that what he is seeing is virtually impossible to put into meaningful words.

He next describes that which surrounds the throne – like a halo – a rainbow, but emerald in appearance. Whether this bow is circular or semi-circular is arguable (note Ezek. 1:28 where it is semi-circular, but the word “around” here in Revelation argues for a complete circle), because the Greek word here is “iris”, which is round. Since a rainbow has a particular attachment to the OT promise never to destroy the earth with a flood (Gen. 9:12-17), its' presence here suggests that there'll be no triumph of God's sovereignty at the expense of His mercy.^{iv}

This rainbow is unlike any earthly rainbow because it appears to be only 1 colour – emerald green – or perhaps a number of shades of green blended together. Apparently, according to most commentators, green represents the grace & mercy of God. ③

In any case, this is an incredible grace & privilege that allows John to see and record what we have here in the text. Others in the Bible were given scenes of heaven^v but the one John records for us provides ominous undertones since it is depicting the start of God's final outpouring of judgment on the earth. The overarching vision we receive is one of a display of God's transcendent glory.

III. The 24 Elders

v. 4

John's vision of the throne now moves from the throne to 24 other thrones which surround the main throne and on which sit beings John calls “24 elders”. They have on white garments and have golden crowns on their heads (Gr. ”stephanos” = “victor's crowns”, not “diadems” or regal crowns). Although the text does not specify, we must assume that these thrones are smaller, less ornate & on a lower plane than the main throne on which God sits.

There is huge disagreement over who these 24 elders are, and it is possible that, until we get to heaven and see them for ourselves, we will never be 100% certain as to the identity of their persons or the group.

The main 3 categories that most ideas fall into as sub-categories are:

- An order of angels
- Representatives of the saints of all ages – both OT & NT

- Representatives of the church alone – meaning the NT church

I have provided a list of commentators & their view of who these elders are:

- Angels: Robert Thomas, William Newell, Art Azurdia III, N.B. Stonehouse, Dean Alford, Robert Mounce
- Saints of all Ages: Jack Van Impe, H. Harold Kent, Lehman Strauss, James Ramsay, David Chilton, Walter Scott, Wm. Hendriksen, Philip Mauro, D.G. Barnhouse, Harry Ironside, John Darby, Henry Morris, Tim Lahaye, F.J. Dake, Alva McLain, Donald G. Barnhouse.
- NT (Church) Saints Only: John MacArthur^{vi}, David Levy, Oliver Greene, John Walvoort, Jehovah's Witnesses (except they believe it is their people).

As you can see, there is a diverse range of scholars who come down on 1 of 3 sides in this debate – from lesser know bible expositors to well known, even famous preachers and theologians. Virtually all expositors do agree that the 24 are a representative group, rather than just a separate 24 beings on their own, even though the text does not specifically say that. Their position on thrones signifies some sort of authority over or representation of someone else.

I do not believe the evidence supports these beings as angels or as a different genre of angel hitherto never mentioned in Scripture. Since angels do not age apparently (as far as we know) it is difficult to see how any of them could be referred to as an elder in the sense of age, although it is possible that “elder” carries the meaning of rank. Most of the big name angels are almost certainly heavily involved in the action of Revelation.

④

There is some evidence that these elders are human beings – obviously redeemed and glorified – but humans nonetheless. The term, “elders” in the Greek is “prebyterons” & is virtually always applied to people, never angels. One possible exception is [Isa. 24:23](#), but even here it is uncertain if the elders here are angels or people.

The white robes they wear is further evidence that people rather than angels are in view, since this is the general “uniform” of saints in revelation (3:5; 7:9, 13,14; 19: 7,8, 14). Even so, angels are also said to be clothed in glowing white or light emanating robes when they are seen (JN 20:12; Rev. 15:6), so that doesn't narrow down the gap for us.

The fact that they sit on thrones may be connected to some of the promises Jesus made to His disciples while on earth – note Matt. 19:28; 20:20-23; LK. 22:30. But are these passages referring to this scene in heaven or Christ's Millennial Kingdom? The latter is more likely. Throughout Revelation, these 24 elders are not involved in any judgments and there is no sense of what they might be ruling over. Their chief role seems to be limited to worship, and they do have some interplay with John, and their thrones suggest some authority over someone or something.

The golden crowns are '*stephanos*' or victor's crowns and are always used in reference to humans rather than angels. Crowns are often related to salvation themes or rewards for service in the NT^{vii}. Crowns sometimes represent ruling & judging too (LK 22:30) but there is no indication of rulings or judgments from these 24. They do have front row seats to God's throne in heaven however.

They are heavily involved in worshipping God & the Lamb as evidenced by Rev. 4:10-11; 5:8-10, 14. They are those who sing a new song (5:9) and redemption is the theme of that song. Some try to say that it could only be redeemed people singing that song, but notice that the 4 living creatures (who are definitely not humans) also sing it. The pronoun “them” (in KJV “us”) is 3rd person so it is relatively ambiguous. These 24 elders may or may not be part of the “them”.

The # 24 could be a reference to the OT orders or flights of priests (cf. I Chronicles 23:3-4; 24:4; 25:9-31), and the 24 apparently do have a sort of priestly function in Rev. 5:8. They could be a group representing the OT and NT saints, although John MacArthur argues that there is no textual warrant to divide the 24 into 2 groups of 12. Also – since we would assume that John himself would be in this group of 24 as one of the main 11 apostles, and the text does not indicate that he was surprised to recognize his own face among these 24. He had also recognized Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17) but there seems to be no indication from the text that he personally recognized any of these beings, which would seem likely if some of them had been his earthly companions and relatives.

If these 24 are those who will reign with Christ in the Millennium (not yet arrived at this point, because the Tribulation is only about to begin), they are now in heaven, not on earth, but since they would not transfer to earth until Christ returns there, this is not a weighty argument.

The 24 do function as angelic beings in Revelation. They are holding bowls of incense (5:8 & cf. 8:3); and harps; they are associated with the 4 living creatures throughout Revelation; and in 7:3, an elder offers John information like the angels do throughout the book, and in Dan. 9:21-27. They are possibly part of the assembly of heavenly beings ⑤ depicted in accounts like: I Kings 22:19; Ps. 89:7; Isa. 24: 23 & Heb. 12:23.

Having looked at all these positions, my own opinion is that they are 12 OT saints & 12 NT saints, and may be specifically the Patriarchs like Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Moses, Job, Samuel, David, etc. and the 11 disciples plus Paul. Relevant verses for me are: Rev. 4:9-11; 5:5-14; 7:11-17; 11:16-18; 14:3 & 19:4. I have not been convinced by any of the arguments I have seen that these are a high rank of angelic beings or a separate order of angelic beings never heard about before this.

IV. The Scene Around the Throne

vv. 5-6

John’s next report is the sights and sounds that are coming out of the throne. This is apparently not the norm, because these things seem to start as John observes. This is a depiction of God beginning to set in motion the final stages of His judgments – cf. Rev. 8:5 & note the parallel in Rev. 16:18. This is a preview of what is about to come, and what makes it more ominous is that this is divine thunder, rumblings & lightning – not natural, but supernatural – cf. Ex. 19:16^{viii}. God is about to put the end of history in motion.

John also sees before the throne – 7 torches of fire, which are the 7 Spirits of God or the fullness of the Spirit of God. This is again (Rev. 1:4) a reference back to Zech. 4:1-7. The Holy Spirit will also play a role in the judgment about to be unleashed. God the Father is ready, the Holy Spirit is ready, and as we’ll see in chapter 5, the Lamb is ready to begin the judgment countdown. History has advanced to the point God had

decreed it would reach – to the exact point in time when all this would begin. Judges 7 and Nahum 2 associate torches with war and an all out battle is about to be released from heaven, from this throne.

John now (v. 6) tells us about “a sea of glass, like crystal”. This is not water, but crystal, possibly diamond, and it is at the base of the throne. It is this sea of crystal; referred to in Rev. 21:1 which will no longer be needed and will be gone. This scene is probably too incredible to imagine & John likely cannot even find the words to describe it as perfectly as he would like to.

God is on the throne, His radiant glory reflecting & refracting off of this crystal sea. Moses, Aaron, Nadab & Abihu had a vision of this too in Ex. 24:9-10. The crystal floor seems to be signifying stability, purity, beauty, perfection & strength. This is what John saw as he was taken up into heaven. In the next lesson we’ll continue to see what & who John saw around the throne of God.

Next lesson – Those Around the Throne – Rev. 4:6b-11

ⁱ See last lesson notes – “The Rapture”, where we looked at this verse.

ⁱⁱ Robert L. Thomas; Revelation 1-7 An Exegetical Commentary; Moody, 1992; p. 337

ⁱⁱⁱ Note chapters 2,9,10,15,17,18

^{iv} Robert Thomas, p. 343

^v Exodus 24:1-10; Ezek. 1:26; II Cor. 12:1-6; Acts 7:55-56; Dan. 7:9-10; Isa. 6:1-13

^{vi} John MacArthur’s argument is that the text gives us no cause to split the 24 into 2 sets of 12 – ie. 12 OT & 12 NT saints.

^{vii} Note I Cor. 9:25 (wreath); Phil. 4:1; I Thess. 2:19 (rejoicing); II Tim. 4:8 (righteousness); James 1:12 (life); I Pet. 5:4 (glory); Rev. 2:10 (life); 3:11; 4:4; 4:10.

^{viii} See also Ex. 9:23,28; I Sam. 7:10; 12:17-18; Ps. 29:3; Ezek. 1:4,13,24.