

The revelation of Jesus Christ

Lesson # 15 Those Around the Throne Revelation 4:6b-11

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<sup>6</sup>and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. 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, 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."

Art Azurdia, in a sermon<sup>i</sup> on this passage, gave the following illustration as a contrast; *"The prevailing attitude of a great many evangelicals is that the corporate worship of the congregation serves as an aid to their own private worship, rather than regarding their private worship as an aid to the more important worship of the congregation. That is why it becomes increasingly easy to stay home on Sunday morning & say, 'after all, I can worship God by myself.' No you can't! Not in the same way you can worship with God's people. You cannot replicate the intensity of that worship in the privacy of your own home."* ①

## I. The Seraphim

vv. 6b-8a

Having described the throne itself, the One on the throne in heaven, the 24 elders & the lightning, thunder, 7 torches and the sea of glass; John's attention is now drawn to the description of the 4 Living Creatures, those closest to the throne in proximity. These 4 Living Creatures are "all around the throne, on each side of the throne". They appear to be the closest beings to the throne of God, so they hold positions of great honour, encircling the throne for the apparent purpose of offering praise & glory to God without ceasing.

Their description by John resembles what Isaiah saw in **Isa. 6:2-3** & Ezekiel's vision in **Ezek. 1:4-14; 10:1,12**.

There are a number of ideas as to what these 4 might symbolize:

- The 4 Gospels – in modern times this idea goes like this:
  - Matthew represents Jesus as king – the Lion of the tribe of Judah Christ

- Mark reveals Him as the Servant of God – the ox – strong & hard working
- Luke – presents the humanity of Christ – the human like 3<sup>rd</sup> being
- John – presents the deity of Christ – the high soaring & majestic eagle

Others in earlier times had different connections to the 4 gospels worked out in their minds, but this idea has a weak basis. The characters are not a perfect match, no matter how you attempt to fit the inferences of the different gospels into the description of these 4.

Another idea is that they represent the attributes of God:

- The lion – for His courage, boldness & victorious sacrifice
- The ox – for patient strength
- The human figure – for sympathy & intelligence
- The eagle – for soaring aspiration or limitless majesty.

But these are 4 worshippers, not the worshipped.

Yet another idea is that they represent 4 signs of the Zodiac – ox, lion, scorpion & aquarius – the 4 quadrants of the heavens, but these 4 have no astrological significance throughout the rest of Revelation & it is not likely that John would have introduced ( through the Holy Spirit ) this sort of symbolism.

Another idea – the 4 main tribes of Israel:

- Judah, Reuben, Ephraim & Dan ( Num. 2:2,10,18,25 ); therefore they represent Israel – again, very unlikely.

Other views: 4 chief apostles, redeemed & glorified men...all unlikely & unwarranted.

So while we can't latch onto a certain symbolic aspect of these 4 creatures that can be agreed upon, we can glean that they are an exalted order of angelic beings, indicated by their proximity to God's throne & their distinguishing features like multiple eyes & wings. They are distinguished from other angels in 5:8,11 & 7:11, & that distinction has to do with their position or rank as compared to all other angels. They are definitely not human. ②

They have something to do with the judicial authority of the throne, as their involvement in the carrying out of divine justice in Rev. 6:1,3,5,7 shows, and as the act of one of them in **Isa. 6:6-7** attests.

They also seem to represent creation in the sense of animation or animate creatures. The things they say in 4:11 are certainly tied to creation and they seem to be some sort of symbolic reference to creatures on earth because it is to this that John compares the appearance of their faces.

Their connection to those beings seen in Isa. 6 & **Ezek. 10,2,14,20** is significant. That they are a high order of angels is evident from that in & of itself. The parallels leave almost no room for argument that John, Ezekiel & Isaiah are describing the same heaven's throne room, albeit at different times in history. Each time is just on the verge of immense judgment coming upon either Israel or the world at large, so that is probably significant as well. Here are descriptions from the accounts:

- There are 4 of them – Ezek. 1:5
- They are "full of eyes" – Ezek. 10:12
- They have the faces of lions, ox, man & eagle – Ezek. 1:10

- They have 6 wings – Isa. 6:2
- Their praise to God is “Holy! Holy! Holy! – Isa. 6:3
- They are called Seraphim ( “burning ones” ) in Isaiah & Cherubim in Ezek. 9:3; 10:2 )
- While a few differences are notable ( ie. number & position of their eyes ), the similarities are remarkable & leave us with no likelihood that they are not the same beings in all 3 books.

## John’s Description

In v. 8a, John continues to describe these beings he is seeing and he now mentions the 6 wings of each. John only describes the scene while Isaiah filled in the details as to why 6 wings – see **Isa. 6:2**. It is significant that 4 of the 6 wings are devoted to worship, while only 2 are functional for movement. They are not able to gaze on God’s effulgent glory so they cover their eyes, and they cover their feet out of humility at being in God’s presence. The 2 functional wings serve to do God’s bidding in service.

Just as God has equipped every creature He has made with attributes and abilities to survive & perform their role in creation to provide the utmost glory to Him, He equipped these 4 to worship Him and to surround His throne “day & night without ceasing to praise Him.”

John says that they are “full of eyes all around & within”, a parallel to what he said in v. 6 with the addition of “within”, and here we find ourselves a bit bewildered. Since we have 2 eyes as do most creatures, and we are familiar with even compound eyes on insects, this stretches our imagination. Robert Mounce comments here that “Revelations’ intended purpose is to stir our imagination, not to present a precise picture”.<sup>ii</sup> However, Robert Thomas counters with “If John saw it, it must be conceptually reproducible. What the expression means is that the Living Beings had eyes all around their bodies and on the undersides of their wings, as suggested by the Cherubim in Ezekiel 10:12. Being so full of eyes positioned in this manner, they are able to move their wings without ever disrupting their view.”<sup>iii</sup>

As a result of their design, nothing escapes their attention; all corners of the 3D compass are covered & yet, out of awe & fear, they somehow do not allow themselves to gaze on God’s glory, whom they attend day & night. This attendance is constant, yet we know from Rev. 6:1,3,5,7 that they have other responsibilities so this idea of constant 100% of the time attendance at the throne is probably not meant by “day & night”, but that their worship is carried on in a constant manner as their primary function. Notice the “whenever” of Rev. 4:9.

## II. The First Oratorio of Praise

v. 8b

What we have before us now is an incredible glimpse at a scene that is generally missing on earth – that of a verbal ascribing to the Holiness, greatness, power & eternity of our Creator. This is the first of five “hymns of praise” in chapters 4 & 5. The praise starts here in chapter 4 with the 4 Living Creatures, then vv. 10-11 adds the 24 elders; at 5:8, harps are added; and in 5:13, all created beings in heaven join in & the praise crescendos. The main point of the praise in chapter 4 revolves around creation, while in chapter 5, it is redemption.

## Holy, Holy, Holy!

It is rightly said that holiness is the only attribute of God which is ever repeated like this in the bible. While most people today would like to think that God's greatest, fundamental & overriding attribute is love, His holiness is the basis for not only how His love is demonstrated and practiced but is the characteristic that undergirds all of His attributes and forces us to come to grips with pure righteousness and crystal clear purpose in having created and in running His universe so that He might be glorified & exalted. Partly so we would not miss this point. He created these 4 Living Creatures to testify of His Holiness in His word. Having witnessed this scene of abject worship, how could anyone ever get the idea that it is all about man?

“God's holiness is His utter & complete separation from evil in any & every form. He is absolutely untainted by any evil or wrongdoing.”<sup>iv</sup> Notice the message of these verses: Ex. 3:5; 15:11; 33:20; I Sam. 2:2; Hab. 1:13; Ps. 47:8; 93:5; 97: 2,6,12; 99:3,5,9; 111:9; I Pet. 1:16.

Out of God's holiness flows His wrath. His wrath should not technically be called an attribute, but is rather a logical, almost technical or automatic response to the trampling of His holiness underfoot by sin. Sin is first & foremost rebellion against His character & revealed will. Because God's holiness is tempered by His perfect grace & mercy, we are not consumed the moment we sin, but God has decreed that He will use our rebellion & sin & weave it into history as a demonstration of His omniscience, omnipotence, justice, etc. This is in order that His creatures will see that He is God alone, there is no other – cf. Isa. 40; 44:6-8 ). No one can stand against His perfect wrath.

The repetition of Holy! Holy! Holy! Is not likely designed to represent the trinity as some postulate, but is repeated for emphasizing the over-arching value of this particular aspect of God's multi-faceted character. ④

## Lord God Almighty

God is praised not just as holy, but as Lord God Almighty, a title ascribed to Him in Rev. 1:8. It is also the title used for Him as His series of wrathful judgments are revealed against the wicked world in Rev. 11:17; 15:3,22; 16:7,14; & 19:6.

He is the sole possessor of omnipotence, which the title “Almighty” signifies. He alone is in the position of having divine authority – as Creator of the universe – to administer righteous and fully effective justice from His throne. His will is done in heaven, and according to Matt. 6:10, we are to pray that His will would also be done on earth.

We realize that from a sense of God's sovereignty as expressed in Rom. 8:28; 11:33-36; Eph. 1:11; Ex. 33:19; Gen. 50:20; Ps. 147:2-6; 97:1-6,10; Prov. 21:1; Isa. 55:11 and so many others<sup>v</sup>, that God's omnipotence causes all things to work towards the fruition of His plan for redemption, to make the wrath of men to praise Him, to glorify Himself. Those He desires to exalt ascend to places of authority, and those He desires to humble are cast down; His word goes out empowered to soften or harden, as He sees fit; He began & He will end human history for His purpose, on His terms & in His time. The omnipotence of God ensures that whatever He desires to accomplish will be done on time, in perfection, by the means He has chosen to use to accomplish it. IOW, His

omnipotence confirms that all of His other attributes will function within His perfect will.

## Who Was & Is & Is To Come – God’s Eternality

Throughout Scripture, we are told that God transcends time<sup>vi</sup> - He has no beginning and no end ( a concept we cannot grasp ). As people, we too are immortal since we will live forever ( once we’ve been born ) either in Heaven or Hell, but we do have a beginning, so we are not ‘eternal’. Even God’s name – “I Am That I Am” expressed to Moses in Ex. 3:14, is a reference to His eternity.

The great comfort inherent in God’s eternity ( which must of necessity include His aseity or self-sufficiency ) is the often overlooked fact that He can make promises like, “I will never leave you or forsake you” to His people, and we can be assured that this promise will be kept as a result of His eternity coupled with His omnipotence. On the dark side of that coin, we can also be assured that God’s promises to punish the wicked in eternal Hell will also come to pass.

At those times when we tend to question God’s justice because of trials we are facing, He reminds us – Job 38-42; Rom. 9:20 – that our puny, temporal, sin cursed brains do not have the mental capacity or the right to question how an eternal God decided to create & run His universe. In our estimation of what seems fair, we tend to question God, not realizing that ‘fair’ can never challenge or judge ‘perfection’.

This first of 5 oratorios in Rev. 4 & 5 says nothing about God’s redeeming power or His love. His grace & mercy are not mentioned yet, because this has to do with His justice which is about to fall finally on a sin crazed world, and these 4 Living Creatures magnify His right as well as His ability to carry out His judgment plans which are about to unfold. ⑤

### III. The Ring of Praise Expands Outward      vv. 9-10

The praise that goes up from the 4 Living Creatures triggers the worship of the 24 elders, who are next closest to the throne among the throng of countless saints & angels surrounding the throne.

In v. 9, the description of the doxology just expressed in v. 8 gives us a couple of key insights into the role of the 4 Living Creatures. Apparently, they do not offer praise, glory or thanks on a consistent, round-the-clock 24-7-365 basis, because the word, “whenever” signifies that there are times when this praise begins, so by inference, there must be times when it is not occurring. It is most likely that the praise takes place prior to certain events in God’s timetable & happens when the 4 LC’s are not otherwise pre-occupied with the tasks given to them by God to perform, ie.) as already seen, throughout Revelation, these 4 are involved in the judgments of God on earth – Rev. 6:1,3,5,7.

The praise they do provide is described here as “giving glory, honour & thanks” to God. None of these 3 words are used in v. 8, but these words convey the sentiment & underlying motivation for what the 4 LC’s say when they praise God. The first 2 words

refer to God's eternity & omnipotence, while the 3<sup>rd</sup>, "thanks" is a reference to His creation of all things. In v. 9b, He again is referred to as eternal – "the One who lives forever & ever." Psalm 29:2 says: *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.*

Once the praise of God begins ( v. 10 ), the 24 elders fall down before God's throne & cast their crowns before the throne. This is the first record of 6 times in Revelation where the 24 elders fall down either before God the Father or the Lamb. ( Rev. 5:8,14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4 ) Three times they are joined by the 4 LC's and once by all the other angels<sup>vii</sup>.

Out of deep reverence & awe of God's majestic otherness, they fall prostrate, worship Him and cast their crowns before Him. They surrender both their dignity & these symbols of either royalty or victory ( depending on how you interpret these crowns ) so that greater glory & honour may go to God. This posture of face down worship of God is found all over the Bible – Gen. 17:3; Josh. 5:14; Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 43:3; 44:4; Isa. 6; MT. 17:6; Acts 9:4...etc.

#### IV. Second "Hymn" of Praise

v. 11

This 2<sup>nd</sup> oratorio of praise is introduced again by the word, "saying" ( cf. v. 8 – "never cease to say" ). Only in Rev. 5:9 is one of these doxologies introduced by a word that connects it to music – "they sang a new song". Even the final 2 of the 5 "hymns of praise" in Rev. 5:12,13 refer to the praise as being "said". This makes Rev. 5:9 the only verse in Scripture ( except possibly for Job 38:7 ) where angels are said to sing. That includes the Christmas accounts!

This doxology speaks directly to God, whereas the 1<sup>st</sup> one seems to be more of a proclamation of His attributes to whomever is in earshot. Note, "Worthy are You, our Lord & God". He alone is worthy to receive glory & honour – the credit ( for lack of a better term ) for what He has created and how He will redeem it. This doxology is really anticipatory of what is about to be revealed as the final stages of God's righteous judgment and redemption are revealed and put in motion. Why is God worthy to receive glory, honour & power? "for You created all<sup>viii</sup> things, and by Your will they existed & were created".

He created all there is – cf. Rom. 11:36 – for His purposes, not ours. We are His creatures and are completely subservient to Him and to His revealed will for our lives. Nothing exists that God does not want to exist and as R.C. Sproul so aptly tells us, "There is no random or maverick molecule out there which is out of His control, which could somehow ruin God's plans and take away His control" – cf. **Col. 1:15-17**. In Him all things hold together until He decides that they no longer need to hold together – cf. **II Pet. 3:7-11; Rev. 20:11-12: 21:4** – because by this time, they will have served their ultimate purpose – to reveal His glory in every way possible.

Creation awaits as we await that final revelation of God's consummate glory as He brings history to a triumphant close in a glorious crescendo of praise in His own fore-ordained time frame – cf. **Rom. 8:19-22**. Do you ever consider the fact that "by Your will they existed & were created", includes Satan, the fallen angels, wicked people, deadly animals, viruses, spiders, scorpions, snakes, poisonous plants, etc.?

This is the only conclusion we can reasonably arrive at since 100% of creation power is ascribed to God alone and there is no consideration given in Scripture to ascribe even the evil & suffering in the world to some other source out of God's control, and plenty of verses<sup>ix</sup> which tell us that God, although not responsible or culpable for these evil things, certainly at least allows them, or at worst, decrees them & controls them. That is reason to praise Him. There would be little reason to praise a "god" who created, but then was powerless to overcome the problems His creation & creatures threw at Him. With this 2<sup>nd</sup> doxology, this scene in God's throne room in heaven ends and we are about to see another one in chapter 5 which is even more intense and awe inspiring.

I end this lesson with another illustration by Art Azurdia, from the same sermon: "Some time ago there was a church that advertised its' worship service in the newspaper by employing a big picture of a football and the text that read as follows: "Our fall worship service schedule allows time for your other religion. Chances are you can catch our opening song & worship service before kickoff, and remember, when it comes to that 4<sup>th</sup> quarter Hail Mary pass, it wouldn't hurt to have a little prayer time under your belt." "This is like taking the hand of God, smiling & talking all the perfunctory talk, all the while looking over his shoulder at something else."<sup>x</sup>

Next lesson - # 16 – Revelation 5:1-5 – The Scroll & the Lion of Judah

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<sup>i</sup> From a sermon on Rev. 4:6-11 by Arturo Azurdia III – at about the 28:50 mark in the MP3 file. His sermons on Revelation can be found at "Spirit Empowered Preaching"'s website.

<sup>ii</sup> As quoted in Robert L. Thomas, Revelation 1-7, p. 361.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Thomas, Revelation 1-7; p. 361

<sup>iv</sup> John MacArthur, Revelation 1-11; Moody; p.155

<sup>v</sup> See also Dan. 4:35; Rom. 11:33-36; Ps. 115:3; Acts 17:26; Prov. 16:1-4; Isa. 46:8-11; I Chron. 29:11-12; II Tim. 1:12; etc.

<sup>vi</sup> Ps. 90:2; 93:2; 102:24-27; Mic. 5:2; Hab. 1:12; I Tim. 1:17; 6:15-16; Heb. 13:8; etc.

<sup>vii</sup> Robert Thomas, p. 365.

<sup>viii</sup> Rev. 10:6; Gen. 1:1; Ex. 20:11; Isa. 40:26,28; JN 10:10-12; 32:17; Col. 1:16...etc.

<sup>ix</sup> Amos 3:6; Rom. 8:20; Deut. 32:23, 39; Ps. 46:8-10; Ps. 105:16,36; Isa. 31:2-3; 45:7; 47:10-11; 54:16-17; etc.

<sup>x</sup> IBIB, Art Azurdia