

Lesson 15 A Throne in Heaven Revelation 4:1-11

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Today's lesson brings us to the third part of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Remember in 1:19 Jesus told John to "Write what you have seen (chapter 1 vision of Jesus), what is now (chapters 2-3 letters addressing the conditions in the seven churches), and what will take place later (chapters 4-22)."

No chapters of the Bible are so inviting, thrilling, and worshipful as chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation. The Lord welcomes us into heaven itself, giving us a brief look at what takes place there and what we can anticipate for ourselves in the future. In chapter 4 the primary focus is on God the Father, sitting upon His throne, enjoying the worship of His creatures. In chapter 5, the focus is on God the Son.

The brief outline I've decided on for chapter 4 includes:

The Call -- the Creator -- the Court -- the Crowns -- the Creatures -- the Chorus.

Let's begin with . . . **THE CALL**

Revelation 4:1 opens with the words "After this ..." These words signal to us that a transition has taken place. What John is about to see is a vision of events which come after the church has finished its course, after the church has been removed from the world in what we term the Rapture. One poet wrote:

**"Think of stepping on shore, and finding it Heaven!
Of taking hold of a hand, and finding it God's hand.
Of breathing a new air, and finding it celestial air.
Of feeling invigorated, and finding it immortality.
Of passing from storm to tempest to an unbroken calm.
Of waking up, and finding it Home."**

After the messages to the seven churches, the church is not mentioned again. The book refers to saints, brethren, the children of Israel, and a multitude of believers . . . but no further reference to the church until the Bride of the Lamb appears near the end of Revelation.

In 4:1 we read that the door was standing open (one writer said that the Greek reads, "the door having been opened" and comments that it was the cross that accomplished that), so the door was open. And the voice said, "Come." Not a weak "if you have nothing better to do" request, but the voice of authority from the Supreme Headquarters of heaven . . . the very throne room of God.

You might be surprised to find the throne is a central theme of Revelation. It is spoken of 46 times. As we read about it today, we are still amazed at what a spectacular sight this must have been . . . awesome, strange and full of the unexpected.

All that John would be shown from here on would be looking down from the point of view of Heaven. If we're going to have any true understanding of the course of world events, it must be based on Heaven's perspective of those events. Also we are confronting here another indication that the Church is not to pass through the Tribulation, but is to be in heaven during the coming terrors of judgment. So that's the call.

Then we see THE CREATOR . . .

In vs. 2 John records there was someone seated upon the throne. Alright . . . we're going to see what God looks like! And how does the apostle describe what he sees? **COLORS!**

Pure, flashing, jewel-like colors, like the blazing radiance cast off by a prism. Some Bible scholars believe John wrote his letters after the book of Revelation. If that is true it might explain why the apostle writes in 1 John 1:5 "God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all." John saw a figure seated on the throne -- but the features of that figure were lost in dazzling lights.

These colors are full of rich and significant meaning. From these colors we learn several important things:

First, we learn that it is not merely God the Father whom John sees upon the throne -- there are actually three Persons manifested there. The first is signified by the stone jasper, which Rev. 21:11 says is crystal clear. We would equate it to a diamond, the most beautiful and precious of all gems, which refracts light into a brilliant display of intense colors. This brilliant crystal symbolizes the dominant attribute of God the Father: His holy perfection.

The second stone is the carnelian or sardius, which is a beautiful glowing, blood-red stone. This stone immediately suggests the Son, who gave His blood for us as an atonement for our sins and Who will judge this wicked world with righteous wrath.

The third stone is the emerald. John saw a great rainbow encircling the throne, green as an emerald. Green is the color of nature, the color of creation. A rainbow was first given after the flood of Noah's time, a sign of God's promise of mercy and grace to sinful mankind. The rainbow in John's vision in varying shades of brilliant emerald green encircling the throne of heaven symbolizes the Holy Spirit administering the holiness and redemption of God to all creation.

You may wonder how a rainbow can encircle the throne. Actually all rainbows are circles. When we see a rainbow in the sky we are only seeing part of it. Half of the image of the rainbow is hidden below the horizon. Betty Welch told us of seeing a complete one in Australia, and Sandy Chambers said after Betty had mentioned that, she was in a plane and saw a total circle rainbow while flying.

So John makes no attempt to describe God in any human shapes or forms. Jasper stands for the white brightness of the purity of God; blood-red carnelian stands for the avenging wrath of God; and the green of the emerald stands for the mercy of God, through which alone we can meet the purity and justice of God.

Just one more interesting thought I read about the stones: The Levitical priest wore the breastplate with 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel -- the first stone was a red ruby for Reuben whose name means "my first begotten son" -- the last stone is jasper for Benjamin whose name means "son of my right hand."

So the sight was brilliant and the sound was awesome. Flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder were coming forth from the throne (vs.5). Recall when God visited Mt. Sinai the people saw and heard "thunder and lightning and a thick cloud on the mount and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud." These thunderings and lightnings proceeding from the throne remind us that God's judgment is something to be feared. "It is a fearful thing to fall in the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:31) Our world doesn't like to think of God as a God of judgment. They prefer to look at the rainbow around the throne of mercy and grace.

Also before the throne 7 lamps were blazing and this is identified for us as the 7 spirits of God. We've already discussed in past weeks the meaning of the sevenfold Spirit, so this is the fullness of the Holy Spirit. There is what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. The Spirit of holiness is before the throne of God like a brilliant reflecting pool, mirroring the holy purity of God.

Again this is not unique to John's vision. In Exodus 24:10, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the 70 elders got a similar manifestation of the presence of the Lord. They saw the God of Israel and "under His feet was a paved work of sapphire stones, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity."

There isn't time to develop this in detail, but this vision in Heaven reminds us that Moses was shown a pattern in heaven of the tabernacle he was to build on earth. Think quickly about the comparisons:

<u>Tabernacle</u>	<u>Heavenly Sanctuary</u>
holy of holies	the throne of god
7 branched candlestick	7 lamps of fire before the throne
bronze laver	sea of glass
cherubim over mercy seat	4 living creatures around the throne
priests	elders (kings and priests)
brazen altar	altar (6:9-11)
incense altar	incense altar (8:3-5)
ark of the covenant	ark of the covenant (11:19)

There is no temple in heaven in a material sense. All of heaven is God's sanctuary for those who serve before His holy throne. But here in Revelation we get a glimpse of perhaps what Moses was shown.

Around the throne were 24 elders, so let's look at THE COURT -

Who are they? There are several opinions. So what's new?? The facts we have in Scripture say (1) they sit on thrones, (2) are clothed in white, (3) have crowns of gold, (4) they cast those crowns before God's throne.

Some say the 24 elders are angelic beings who serve God.

Ray Stedman, a respected evangelical pastor/teacher, believes they are angels who have been put in charge of this present age. They wear crowns because they are victors in their battles with Satan. They wear white robes because they are the righteous angels who refused to join the rebellion of Lucifer. The argument against that seems to be that nowhere in the Old Testament or New Testament are angels seen as having crowns or being rewarded, nor does it ever speak of them as sitting on thrones.

Others say they are representatives of redeemed Israelites and the Church (12 patriarchs and 12 apostles). In the Holy City, the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21, the names of the patriarchs and the apostles are on the foundation stones of the wall. Since there they are a joint foundation, it may be that the 24 elders represent them. The question that poses, however, is that in Daniel 12 we're told that the Old Testament saints will not be resurrected until the end of the tribulation.

Some say all 24 elders represent the church . . . the faithful people of God. White robes are promised to the faithful (Rev. 3:4), crowns are promised in Rev 2:10 for those who are faithful unto death, and Jesus promised thrones to those who forsook all and followed him (Matthew 19:27-29). So the description of the 24 elders fits well within the promises made to the faithful.

Why 24? In 1 Chronicles 24:7-18 we read that there were so many priests in Israel that they couldn't all serve in the Temple at one time, so they were divided into 24 different courses (or groups). Each course had its elder. The Levites too were divided into 24 courses for the work of the Temple and they praised God with harps, psalteries and cymbals (1 Chron 25:9-13). Next week in Rev. 5:8 we'll see these heavenly elders also have harps. So the worship of the priests and Levites was just a faint, pale copy of the worship of the 24 elders in this ideal heavenly picture we have here.

What is their purpose? The Old Testament pictures God sitting on His throne and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right hand and on His left. Isaiah 24:23 speaks of God reigning in glory among his elders. The thought is that God has His council or His senate surrounding him. They function as a jury, but their role is not to decide whether or not men are guilty, but to agree with the righteous acts of the Judge. God insists that things be done decently and in order in His church and He insists that things be done decently and in order in His court . . . there is a formality and impressive dignity of the proceedings calculated to strike a proper reverence in every heart.

Let's look at THE CROWNS . . .

Charles Spurgeon makes this observation, "There are no crown bearers in heaven that were not cross bearers here below."

The elders cast their crowns before the throne. It is a sign of submission as well as adoration. God has conquered the souls of men and the Church - as a body - has surrendered to God completely and abdicated all power to Him. There can be no Christianity without submission.

This is not a lesson about rewards, but I want to identify briefly the crowns mentioned in scripture for believers. There are five wreaths or victor's crowns, called *stephanos* in Greek. Another type of crown in scripture is the *diadema* which is a blue band trimmed with white on a tiara, a symbol of royalty. At the Second Coming, the heavens will open revealing Christ the conquering King, who will be riding a white horse and wearing many diadems (Rev. 19:11-12). That type of crown represents kingly supremacy and is reserved for Christ alone.

The *stephanos*, on the other hand, represents worthy service. The Christian may earn different *stephanos* crowns, just as an athlete might win gold medals in different events. Briefly:

The imperishable crown (1 Cor. 9:24-25) is for the one who victoriously runs the race of life and exercises control in all things. With the power of the Holy Spirit he can say "no" to temptation, to self-indulgence, to distractions and pursue holiness with a whole heart.

The crown of exultation or joy (also called a soul-winner's crown) (Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19-20) is for those who have declared the gospel to unbelievers, led them to Christ, and built them up as new Christians.

The crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:7) is for those, like Paul, who have lived for Christ's return and can say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith."

The crown of life, or martyr's crown (James 1:12) is for the person who perseveres under trial.

The crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:1-4) is for leaders, both pastors and lay leaders, who shepherd God's flock willingly, sacrificially, humbly, and with integrity.

Of course there is one more crown which makes these crowns possible and that is the crown of thorns. How can we thank Him enough? Certainly our only fitting response in heaven will be the same as the 24 elders -- to cast our crowns at His feet and worship the Lamb that was slain.

What about THE 4 LIVING CREATURES?

Have you ever tried to explain a complicated dream to someone the next morning? No matter what you say, it never fully conveys the complexity of the dream. Here John uses the word "like," which is a simile. He is describing by comparison to things we know. Again, there are several ideas as to the symbolism here.

Four is a number of universality, that which is global: 4 winds, 4 compass points, 4 seasons, etc. It has also been associated with government. So some associate these creatures with God's government of both human affairs and of the created universe. The KJV calls them beasts. A better translation, however, is living ones, creatures.

The facts about them indicate that they are always found near and around the throne and near the Lamb. They have six wings and are full of eyes. We compared the features of Revelation and Ezekiel. Ezekiel definitely identifies them as cherubim (Ez. 10:20,22).

Cherubim we recall were (1) represented on the hanging veil which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. (2) There were 2 cherubims on the lid of the ark which is called the mercy seat. One of the commonest pictures of God is to picture Him as sitting between the cherubim. (3) It is the cherubim who guarded the way to the garden when Adam and Eve were banished from it.

From this picture one thing clearly emerges - the cherubim are angelic beings whose place in heaven is close to God and who are the guardians of the throne of God. Cherubim are the highest of all created intelligences.

Another note is that Satan, before his fall was of this order, the anointed or set apart cherub described in Ezekiel 28 - a being of utmost beauty and power. Lucifer fell from this high office and became Satan.

Because they are praising God we're reminded of Isaiah 6 and the mention of seraphim who stand above the throne of God constantly praising Him for His holiness, power and preeminence. In one sense we might describe these four living creatures as the worship leaders of heaven.

So what do the creature's faces symbolize? Here are some ideas from a variety of commentators:

1. **Aspects of creation:** lion-nobility; ox-strength; man-wisdom; eagle-swiftness.
2. **Aspects of Jesus' work** represented in the four gospels: lion-leadership, power, royalty (John); ox-sacrificial priestly work (Luke); man-incarnation, humanity (Matthew); eagle-gift of the Holy Spirit, hovering His wings over the church (Mark).
3. Irenaeus, an early Church father, says the fourfold form represents **the four principle covenants which God made** with the human race: with Adam prior to flood; Noah after the flood; the law with Moses; and the redemption of man with Christ.
4. Another idea is that God's Shekinah glory was in the tabernacle and the tribes of Israel camped around it. Three tribes were each on the N/E/S/W and leading one side was Judah whose symbol was the lion; Ephriam-ox; Reuben-man; Dan-eagle. So this is a **picture of Israel with God in their midst.**
5. Some see this as a picture of **all the attributes of God** as He works through His angels.
Take your pick.

Full of eyes seems to indicate unlimited intelligence, ceaseless vigilance, suggestive of the omniscience of the One who sits on the throne. They do not rest day or night which is a reminder that God never sleeps nor slumbers.

If there is any part of this lesson that is particularly applicable to us it is what I have termed **THE CHORUS**. . . the praise and worship given at the throne of God.

True spiritual worship is perhaps one of the greatest needs in our individual lives and in our churches. There is a constant emphasis on witnessing for Christ and working for Christ, but not enough is said about worshipping Him. **Worship means to use all that we are and have to praise God for all that He is and does.**

Heaven is a place of worship and God's people shall worship Him through all eternity. The repetition of Holy, Holy, Holy might suggest the triune nature of God or simply be for emphasis.

Whenever the four living creatures give worship to God, the 24 elders respond. Taking their cue from the worship leaders of heaven, they immediately respond with worship and praise.

God is praised for His holiness. The basic idea of holiness is difference. That which is holy is different; it is separate from the common things; it belongs to another order of life and of being. That is supremely true of God. God is different from men. If He were like us, simply an outsized, glorified, powerful human person, we wouldn't praise Him. The very mystery of God, the very difference of God, moves us to awed admiration in His presence, and to amazement that His love is so great it stoops down to bring rebellious people to salvation.

He is praised for His omnipotence. He is The Almighty. He is everlasting. Here is the triumphant affirmation that God endures unchanging even as we ignore and reject His offer of grace and mercy.

Worship is the ascription of "worth-ship" to the Lord. It is the function of telling Him how absolutely worthy He is to receive our praise and adoration. The elders worship Him as the Creator and instruct us in a basic truth of creation - **all things were created by His power and for His pleasure.**

Perhaps we can see if living creatures represent nature in all its grandeur, and the 24 elders stand for great united Church in Christ Jesus, when they unite in praise - we see all of creation and the church both praising God.

I want to share a few observations about worship that maybe we can take home with us this week. Gordon Dahl wrote, "Most Americans worship work, work at play, and play at worship." T. S. Eliot, who wrote *The Cocktail Party* says, "The reason the cocktail glass is so important is because the communion cup has lost its meaning."

What, then, is the essence of worship? It is the celebration of God! When we worship God, we celebrate Him: We extol Him, we sound His praises, we boast in Him!

Worship is not the casual chatter among ourselves that drowns out the organ prelude; we celebrate God when we allow that prelude to attune our hearts to the glory of God by the sweet melody that draws us into His presence.

Worship is not the mumbling of prayers or the mouthing of hymns with little thought and less heart; we celebrate God when we join together earnestly in prayer and intensely in song.

Worship is not pompous words or boring clichés when one is asked to give a testimony; we celebrate God when all of the parts of the service fit together and work to a common end of intimacy with Him.

Worship is not grudging giving money or compulsory service; we celebrate God when we give to Him cheerfully and gratefully and serve Him with integrity.

Worship is not haphazard music done poorly, not even great music done merely as a performance; we celebrate God when we enjoy and participate in music to His glory.

Worship is not a distracted endurance of the sermon; we celebrate God as we hear His Word gladly and seek to be conformed by it to the image of our Savior.

Worship is not the hurried motions of a "tacked-on" Lord's Table; we celebrate God pre-eminently when we fellowship gratefully at the ceremonial meal that speaks so centrally of our faith in Christ Who died for us, Who rose again on our behalf, and Who is to come again. Just as a thoughtful gift is a celebration of a birthday, as a special evening out is a celebration of an anniversary, as a warm eulogy is a celebration of a life -- so a worship service is a celebration of God.

When you come to worship think about these four things:

- 1) Draw near and listen well, because God is communicating
- 2) Be quiet and calm, because God hears the inaudible and sees the invisible
- 3) Make a commitment and keep it, because God doesn't forget

4) Don't decide now and deny later, because God doesn't ignore decisions.

What a wonderful, uplifting reminder:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."