

Revelation 4

Referencing: Study of Bishop Mark Hughes & notes from the Full Life Study Bible. Other tool used was Bible Explorer 4.

A Door Opened in Heaven (4:1)

After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will show thee things which must be hereafter.

"After this" indicates a passage of time. John on Patmos did not see one continuous vision. Days may have passed between the revealing of the different sections of the Book of Revelation to him (see 7: 1,9; 15:5; 18: 1). Therefore, this verse signals a change of scene and time. John sees a door that stands open in heaven. Then the same voice that he heard in the previous vision (1: 10) speaks to him again "like a trumpet," telling Him to "come up here" (NIV), that is, to heaven. He is about to be shown "things which must be hereafter" (see 1:1,19), things that will take place in fulfillment of God's plan.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the events taking place at the throne in heaven and are introductory to all that follows in the Book of Revelation.

The Throne in Heaven (4:2-3)

And immediately I was in the Spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.

Immediately John is "in the Spirit," caught up to the throne in heaven. In 1: 10 it introduces the first section of the book with John's vision of Christ in the midst of the golden lampstands. Here (v. 2) it introduces the vision of Christ on the throne, breaking the seven seals and administering the seven trumpets and the seven bowls of judgment. It occurs again in 17:3 introducing another change of scene, followed by three concluding events: the fall of Babylon, the defeat of the Antichrist, and the end of Satan's deceptions.

As John, in the Spirit, is caught away into heaven, his attention focuses first on the throne of God "set in heaven," that is, already standing there. He sees that the throne is occupied. Since it is God's throne, the occupant is God the Father.

John does not attempt to describe God, however. He is aware of God's presence, but the glory is too great for him to describe as having a shape or form. All he can do is speak of a diamond brilliance, a fiery orange-red presence. The "jasper" is said in Revelation 21:11 to be crystal clear, not like the opaque jasper of today; it was more likely the diamond. The "sardine stone" (or sard, sardius, or carnelian) was a beautiful red precious stone, or gem, symbolizing redemption.

Twenty-four Thrones for Twenty-four Elders (4:4)

And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold.

God's throne is not the only throne John sees. In a circle around it are twenty-four "seats," or thrones (the word is the same), for twenty-four elders. "Elder" or "presbyter" was used by the Early Church as a synonym for the bishop (overseer, pastor) of a local church. The Jews used it for members of the Sanhedrin (their senate and high court).

The Bible does not explain who the elders were.

A number of things, however distinguish the elders from the angels. Angels are outside the circle of the elders (5: 11). Nowhere in the Bible are angels called elders. The crowns the elders wear are victors' crowns (or wreaths); the word is used for crowns prepared for believers, not angels. At the same time, the crowns speak of royalty. When the soldiers crowned Jesus with the crown (or wreath, the same word) of thorns, their purpose was to mock him as the "king of the Jews." In our text (4:4) the word is used in connection with the elders who are sitting on thrones and have royal power (5:10). The white clothing is also the same as that promised to the believers who are overcomers (victors, winners). (See 2:10 and 3:4.) Therefore, it seems preferable to believe that the elders in some way represent the Church.

It is noteworthy also that in the Old Testament visions of God's throne, where seraphs and cherubs are mentioned, no elders are present.

Isa. 6:1 In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. 6:2 Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. 6:3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. 6:4 And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

This indicates that the elders are a new group that will be before the throne of God in the events of the latter time, which John is shown in this vision. Their number, twenty-four, might be a counterpart of the twenty-four clerical divisions of the temple (1 Chronicles 24:1-19). More likely it stands for the total church of God in the old and the new covenants with their twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles, respectively, who have their names on the gates and foundation stones of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:12-14). Then these twenty-four elders symbolize, or perhaps represent, the entire redeemed church of God throughout all ages. (Note that they are individuals, real people, and they talk with John in Revelation 5:5; 7:13.)

The Sevenfold Spirit of God as Seven Lamps of Fire (4:5-6a)

And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal.

After describing the elders, John's attention is drawn back to the throne itself and to the "seven lamps of fire"

in front of it. The lightnings, thunderings, and voices are reminiscent of Old Testament expressions of God speaking, as at Sinai (Exodus 19: 16; 20: 18), and rendering judgment. Besides adding to the awe and majesty of the throne, they are indicative of the judgments to come. The seven lamps of fire, we are told, are the 'seven spirits of God,' interpreted by some to be seven angels. However, they may well represent the sevenfold Spirit of God spoken of by Isaiah (11:2-3). They let John know that the Holy Spirit was and is present at the throne. They also speak of the Holy Spirit as a blazing fire, filled with holy indignation against all sin. See Isaiah 4:4 where the Spirit of God is called "the spirit of judgment" and the "spirit of burning." He reproves the guilty and calls them to account (John 16:8).

Between him and the throne, John sees something like a "sea of glass, clear as crystal". Its beauty is so great, sparkling with reflected glory, that it is almost beyond human words to describe. Some take this as a symbol of the distance and separation between the Creator and the creation.

Because this "sea" is in the heavenly sanctuary, it seems best to take it as a resemblance to the bronze laver in the earthly tabernacle (Exodus 30: 18-21) and to the "molten sea," or giant laver, in the temple of Solomon (2 Chronicles 4:2-6). The priests washed there before they appeared before the Lord for service. The heavenly priesthood, however, is already clean, already sanctified, already holy-thus this sea is a sea of glass.

Four Living Creatures (4:6b-8)

And in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. ⁷ And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. ⁸ And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.

Four "beasts," or living beings, around the throne complete the picture. (The Greek word translated "beast" here is different from that of other passages, such as Revelation 13:1.) They are full of eyes on the front and on the back, which represent intelligence, alertness, understanding, and awareness of what is going on in all directions.

The language describing the four living beings is drawn from the Old Testament, especially from the description of the cherubs in Ezekiel, though they are not called cherubs in the Book of Revelation. Cherubs are first mentioned as guardians of the road to the Garden of Eden after the Fall (Genesis 3:24). Later we find sculptures of them in the tabernacle and the temple. There were two cherubs of gold above the mercy seat, the solid gold cover of the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:18). God in His manifestation in the temple is often referred to as He who dwells "between the cherubim" (1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Psalms 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:16). (The "im" in "cherubim" is the Hebrew plural ending; that is, "cherubim" is simply the plural of "cherub.")

On the basis of the Old Testament passages it would seem that the creatures John saw are representative of all God's creation: the lion as the king of the wild animals, the calf (that is, "ox-calf") as the chief domesticated animal in those days, the man as created in the image of God, and the eagle as the king of birds. Taken together, they indicate that all nature joins in praising God. They indicate also, by their honoring of the One on the throne, that God is sovereign over all His creation. Each of the four living beings has six wings like the seraphs ("seraph" means "burning one") Isaiah saw in his vision (where their wings speak of both humility and quickness [Isaiah 6:1-2]). They were so full of the reflected glory of God that they seemed to be on fire. Like the seraphs also, these living creatures never cease crying "Holy, holy, holy," but they refer to God as the Lord God Almighty instead of the Lord of hosts. Instead of speaking of the earth being full of His glory, they speak

about His eternity: the One who always "was, and is, and is to come." And unlike the seraphs, they are full of eyes all around and within, which emphasizes their understanding and wisdom.

Though they praise God continually, they also perform His will and carry out His judgments (Revelation 6:1-2). Therefore, they are real beings, rational beings, not just symbols. It seems that they not only represent all creation before God, like the cherubs Ezekiel saw, but are also the leaders of all creation. They speak in unison as they praise God. They also speak individually (Revelation 6:1,3,5,7).

As the Almighty One He has all power. He is omnipotent. He not only is dedicated to carrying out His plan but also has the power to do it. No king, no dictator, no demon or devil, can withstand Him or prevent Christ's final triumph.

See Note on Eagles: Leviticus 11:13

The Lord Worthy of Worship (4:9-11)

And when those beasts give glory and honor and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

This threefold praise is no mere form. The indication here is that the praise of the living beings is not always at the same height. The Greek *hotan* ("when;" "whenever," NIV) means here that from time to time, over and over again, these living beings overflow in a great outpouring of glory, honor, and thanks to the One on the throne. This and similar phrases occur eight times in the Book of Revelation: 4:9,11; 5:12-13; 7:12; 19:1; 21:24,26.

Every time these living beings break out in homage to God, the twenty-four elders simultaneously rise, descend from their thrones, and prostrate themselves before the throne of God, casting their crowns before Him as they do (see also 5:8,14; 19:4). In this way they show to Him their reverence, their dependence, and their subjection. This is also their acknowledgment that their authority is derivative, delegated. Their royal power does not represent an opposing or separate kingdom, but one subject to the throne of God and having its source in Him alone. Like the four living beings (v. 9), they worship God as "him that liveth for ever and ever," the eternal "I am" (Exodus 3:14-15).

In their praise the twenty-four elders recognize God as their Lord, which in the Old Testament language would refer to His covenant keeping name *Yahweh* (sometimes misspelled in English as *Jehovah*, because some take the Hebrew consonants for this Name [YHWH or JHVH] and insert the vowels of the Hebrew word for 'Lord,' making "Jehovah" an artificially created combination of the consonants of a personal name and the vowels of a title).

They ascribe their praise directly to God, recognizing that He is also their Creator, and thus the Giver of all the good things we enjoy. Truly He is worthy to receive glory, honor, and power. We can recognize two truths here. First, man cannot create something out of nothing. But God did at a specific point in the beginning of time. We can only discover, use, and rearrange what has been given us by God when He created all things. Second, all these things we use and enjoy were created not merely for our benefit but for God's. We honor Him only as we use them for His glory.