

I read a funny story about a man who was walking by his neighbor's house and saw his neighbor trying to get a large wooden packing crate through his door. The big wooden crate was stuck. He walked up and from the sidewalk he said to his neighbor, "Here, let me try to help you." So, they tried to maneuver that wooden crate through the door and they pushed and they pulled and they pushed and they pulled. Finally, after about 15 minutes the man on the inside said, "I guess it's no use. It just won't go out." The man on the outside said, "Out! I thought you were trying to get it in!"

Thank God the door to heaven is not that hard to get through. If you recall, two weeks ago, we looked at the Lord's letter to the church in Laodicea, the last of the seven churches, where we were presented with this image of Jesus knocking on the closed door of this inactive and indifferent church, but as we will see, as we continue in the book of Revelation, we come to an ironic twist – even though the door to the church may be closed, we find that the door to heaven is wide open.

Now as a reminder, it is the Apostle John who is writing this book from a Roman penal colony on a barren rocky island called "Patmos". He was exiled there because of his faith in Jesus Christ and for preaching the gospel. John was doing what God wanted him to do, and because he was doing what God wanted him to do – John, who is a very old man, finds himself on Patmos – forced to work in the marble mines on the island. From our point of view, this may not seem right, it may not seem fair, but from God's point of view, this was an ideal situation for John to receive this divinely inspired revelation. What the Roman authorities did to shut John up, God used as an opportunity to produce one of the most popular books in the entire Bible. It was all part of God's purpose and plan all along.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Revelation 4**, and we will begin with **verse 1**. John tells us,

¹After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things." ²Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. ³And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance.

I want to draw your attention to the first three words in this passage. This chapter begins with the words "**after these things**" if fact, that phrase is used twice in the first verse, which suggests that John is making an important transition to the next

part of the book, which was explained in the outline provided back in **Chapter 1 verse 19**. If you remember, the Lord gave John an outline for the entire book of Revelation when He said,

Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.

The *things which you have seen* applied to **Chapter 1**. Those were the things John just saw. The *things which are* applied to the churches in John's present day. These were the letters to the seven real churches we just looked at in **Chapters 2 and 3** that represented all churches during the church age. Then finally, there are *the things that will take place*, and those are the things that shall be hereafter – referring to the end times described in **Chapters 4 through 22**. So, this is an important transition where God describes to John and to us – in advance, the things that **must take place** in the future. These things will not happen by chance, they don't occur by accident, they must take place according to God's purpose and plan.

We are told in this passage that John was caught up in **the Spirit** into heaven, meaning this was not a dream, but rather by God's power, John was supernaturally permitted to experience what we normally cannot experience. He was given a rare glimpse into heaven – more specifically the throne room of God.

So, what happened to John's body? Did it remain in Patmos or was it transported to heaven? Well, we are not told, but the same thing happened to the Apostle Paul about 40 years earlier when he too got a glimpse of heaven, and likewise, did not know what happened to his own body. Paul did not know if he was in the body while in heaven or if he had an out of body experience, but whatever happened to Paul, his experience in heaven gave him the confidence and the peace to endure his own persecution and suffering in this world.

Now, unfortunately, Paul was not permitted to share his experience, but John on the other hand was told to record everything he sees and hears and to share it with us, and the first thing that caught John's eye was the **throne** – it's the centerpiece in the room, and everything else he described was in relation to the throne. The throne is mentioned some 40 times in the book of Revelation, and the throne is the key word in this chapter because it symbolizes the power and the rule of the **One** who sits on it – God the Father.

It's our heavenly Father who sits there, it's not an empty throne, and this is so important to grasp before it's revealed what must happen on the earth – for no matter what happens on the earth, no matter what is coming on the horizon – God

is on His throne. He is sovereign and His purposes and His plans must take place. I think this is very important to understand, especially later when it appears that Satan, and the Antichrist, and his False Prophet (*the Satanic trinity*) seem to have the upper hand, when in fact, they do not. Although, all hell breaks loose upon the earth, there is absolutely no panic in heaven for God is on His throne. It's not an empty throne.

Then John tries to describe what he sees expressed in vivid colors. If you notice, John does not describe a form or a figure seated on the throne, instead he uses images of color and light. He tells us that the **One** seated on the throne was like a **jasper stone** and **sardius** in appearance. Jasper stone is a clear gem, similar to a diamond, and sardius is red in color, similar to a ruby. These were colors selected by God for John to see, and they most likely represented some aspect of God's glory – but we can only guess what that may be.

Did you notice John's use of the word "like" in the passage? We will see that word used often in the book of Revelation. As you might imagine, John's senses are in overdrive. One moment, he was in a prison setting on Patmos and now he's experiencing the palace – the throne room of God. John is overwhelmed by what he sees – the brilliance and the flashes of colors, possibly colors that he has never seen before, colors beyond our normal spectrum of vision, and he is having difficulty putting what he sees into words, therefore, he uses the word "**like**" over and over again. So, the glory of God is not jasper and sardius, but to John, it looks like jasper and sardius.

In addition to these colors, there is something **like** an **emerald-hued rainbow** that completely encircles the throne. I don't know if it is something like you see in the slide – a vertical looking rainbow or perhaps it is horizontal resembling a halo. We are not told, but I do know that a rainbow usually appears after a storm, but here it comes before the storm, and maybe consistent with God's promise, this never-ending rainbow symbolizes God's mercy – mercy that endures forever even in the midst of the judgment and wrath to come. Remember, by God's mercy, people will still be saved during the Tribulation period.

Next, we see that John's attention is diverted from the throne to those around the throne. Look at **verse 4**.

Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.

There are all kinds of ideas about these **twenty-four elders** seated around the throne of God – at least a dozen or so ideas, but eventually these ideas boil down to just a few possibilities – either their mention is merely symbolic in nature, or they are angels, or they are saints. We are not told exactly what they are, but I do have some thoughts.

When it comes to the Bible, to include the book of Revelation, I tend to take things literal until it is obvious it should not be taken literal, and as a result, I don't believe these twenty-four elders are just symbols – for as we will see later, they participate in various activities in heaven. So, these twenty-four elders are not symbols – they are heavenly beings. **Are they angels?** I don't believe they are angels either, because although angels may wear white garments, I am not aware of angels being seated **upon thrones** in the presence of God wearing **golden crowns** on their heads.

What about saints? Could they be saints? Well, Jesus did promise that His followers would sit with Him around His throne. Jesus said to His disciples in **Matthew 19:28**,

“Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

We are also told these elders wear **golden crowns**. In this usage, the Greek word for crown is *stephanos* – which are victor's crowns given as rewards. **What did Paul tell us in 2 Timothy 4:7-8?**

*⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;
⁸ in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.*

So, putting this altogether, I believe like most people – that the twenty-four elders represent the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the twelve apostles in the New Testament. Collectively, they represent the redeemed, the family of God throughout history. This is where I land, and if we jump ahead to **Chapter 21, verses 12 and 14**, we see these same two groups described in the New Jerusalem.

¹²It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel.

¹⁴ And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Okay, back to **Chapter 4**. Let's look at **verses 5 and 6**.

⁵ Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; ⁶ and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind.

Again, all of John's senses are alive. He is seeing and hearing all of this. He was probably like a small child seeing a huge 4th of July fireworks display for the very first time. John sees flashes of lightening and he hears booming thunder, signs for us that a storm is on its way. We are also told that present with the heavenly Father is the Holy Spirit – represented in His fullness as the **seven Spirits of God**. So, in the throne room, we see the God the Father and God the Holy Spirit and the stage is set for God the Son to come later in **Chapter 5**.

John tells us there is also a **sea of glass, like crystal** around the throne, and as we might expect, there are all kinds of wild guess about the symbolism of what John is seeing here. The suggestions about the sea of glass are mind numbing. Maybe it is symbolic and maybe it's nothing more than **something like a sea of glass**, but with that said – I will say this. During the Tribulation period, people on the earth will feel as if they are being tossed around in a raging stormy sea, but in heaven, around the throne, it will be as smooth and calm as a sea of glass – a sea of peace and contentment for God is on the throne – it's not an empty throne.

Now, speaking of wild guesses, John introduces us to the **four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind**, and these four living creatures appear to be the nearest to God. They are around the throne, and John continues to describe them in **verses 7-8**.

⁷ The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."

Okay, this could keep us up all night trying to figure this out – and we never will. Although not identical, there seems to be some similarity of John’s description of these creatures to the descriptions of high-ranking angels called *seraphim* in **Isaiah 6** which means “*fiery or burning ones*” and *cherubim* in **Ezekiel 1** and in **Ezekiel 10**, which are angels who function as attendants or guardians of sacred places. So, they could be *seraphim* or *cherubim*, maybe a special combination of the two, or they could be angelic beings so unique in appearance and function there is nothing else like them – we just aren’t told.

In regards to their description – with their different faces, six wings on each, and all those eyes – which must be a sight to see, I can only assume that they represent certain aspects of God’s nature and His creation. Again, we could spend all day on this and unfortunately in the end – we could very well *miss the forest because of the trees*, meaning we could get so focused on dissecting every little detail, and guessing what they mean, that we miss the big picture – and here’s the big picture: God is not like us. His ways are not our ways. His dwelling place is nothing like we have ever seen, and the heavenly creatures around Him are beyond our comprehension – but there is something about them we can understand.

The most important thing about these creatures is not what they look like but what they are doing. They worship God. They cry out, “**Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.**”

God’s holiness is the only attribute in the Bible that is mentioned three times in a row. It’s not love, love, love – it’s not mercy, mercy, mercy – it’s holy, holy, holy. It’s what makes God – God and sets Him apart from everything and everyone else. The Lord God is not like us. He is holy. He is set apart.

Now John is not done, and he continues to tell us about the activities around the throne. Let’s look at **verses 9-11**.

⁹ And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ¹¹ “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

What was the dominant activity in the throne room? It's worship. It's never ceasing worship, further demonstrated by the twenty-four elders **casting their crowns before the throne** of God.

According to Adam Clarke, this is representative of a common practice in the ancient Roman Empire. The emperor of Rome ruled over many lesser kings, like King Herod for example, and these kings were at times commanded to come before the emperor and lay their crowns down before him in honor and respect. Then the emperor would give the crowns back, as a demonstration that their crowns, their right to rule, and their victory came from him and him alone. Though they were kings, they had to acknowledge the supremacy of the emperor.

If the twenty-four elders are the saints who represent the family of God from all time, as I believe they are, then there will come a time when we too will cast the crowns given us as victors before the throne in worship of God.

You know, worship should come natural to us as followers of Jesus Christ, but I have concerns, and I think Charles Swindoll sums it up best. He said, "My great concern is that we tend to play the game of "church." We learn how to dress, how to sit, and how to look. We even learn the words of the songs. **But what about our focus as we sing them?**" While we sing, "*A Mighty Fortress is our God,*" we're thinking, *why did she wear a dress like that?* We belt out, "*How Great Thou Art,*" and wonder, *what am I having for lunch?* We can do that and not even change our expressions. That's not worship—that's playing the church game.

What then is worship? Swindoll continues and says, "Simply put, worship is ascribing "worth" to something or someone. We attribute value, honor, and devotion to our object of worship. When we truly worship God, we turn all of our attention, affection, and adoration toward Him. That's the missing jewel—worshiping God by ascribing to Him supreme worth, for He alone is worthy. God alone is the subject of our praise and the object of our worship. We miss it when our focus becomes horizontal—riveted on people and things—rather than vertical—centered on God and God alone. It has become too common for Christians to surrender everything for their work, but at the same time to sacrifice nothing in worshiping the One who gave His life to save ours. Stop and think. **Is that you?**" **Does the "church game" describe what worship has become for you?**

Dr. Vernon Whaley has been training worship leaders for decades. His passion for worship stems from the small Alaska church he attended as a child. His parents were missionaries there, and they had a deep concern for people with disabilities.

When they met for the services, it was a remarkable crowd – an alcoholic turned deacon, a prostitute transformed into a Sunday school teacher, a blind man who played the piano, a former felon who kept the church grounds, a young woman lame from birth, and a young man with Downs Syndrome who helped take the offering.

They all came to worship God in that small church, and they loved to sing – especially on Sunday nights. They sang song after song after song.

Dr. Whaley recalls one Sunday night as a child, there was a stir in the middle of the congregation. He turned around to see a disabled girl slowly steering her wheelchair to the front of the church. The converted alcoholic got up and helped her roll to the front of the pulpit. His father, Reverend Whaley came down near her. Using her alphabet slate, she told him she wanted to sing a solo. She wanted to sing “Amazing Grace”. The blind pianist struck up the tune for “Amazing Grace,” and the girl began making groans and moans in time with the music. Dr. Whaley said “I was not able to understand a word she sang, but somehow that did not matter. All of us understood intuitively what she was doing, and more important why she was doing it. There was no doubt. We all knew she was worshiping God from her heart.”

In light of who we are, and recognizing who God is and what He has done for us, should move us to worship Him from the heart – and that should be an attitude that stays with us no matter where we are. Tony Evans says, *“If you limit worship to where you are, the minute you leave that place of worship you will leave your attitude of worship behind like a crumpled-up church bulletin.”*

So, the question is, **are you truly worshiping God?**

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