

# WORSHIP IN HEAVEN

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## Revelation 4

### Introduction:

We are returning today to our study in the Book of Revelation. We spent three weeks in the first chapter looking at the introduction to this marvelous prophetic message. Then we have been seven weeks in chapters 2-3 looking at the messages from the Lord Jesus Christ to the seven churches in Asia Minor.

Before we go any further, I want to take a few minutes to address some of the controversy surrounding this apocalyptic book. Over the years there have been many approaches taken to try to interpret the meaning and significance of John's writing and this vision that came to him from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I just want to try to highlight a few of the most significant ideas regarding the book, and then to look at some views regarding the end-times chronology in general.

First of all, there is the allegorical approach to understanding Revelation. This approach says that the teachings and the images of Revelation are not to be taken literally, but simply represent the ongoing struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan. There are lessons to be learned from the book, but nothing that can be tied to specific events in history, past or present. The problem with this approach is that one also has to interpret much of the rest of Scripture from an allegorical perspective in order to make it fit.

The other key approach is the view that John's writing is to be taken literally. This is the position I would take. When John says he saw a throne and someone seated on the throne, he means just that. In his vision, he saw in heaven an actual throne on which was seated a king—the Lord God Almighty.

Obviously, as in any literature, there are figures of speech – e.g. gold refined by fire in 3:18; sun black as sackcloth in 6:12. But unless there is a clear figure of speech, designed to illustrate a point, we must

take John at his word, believing that he means what he says, and says what he means.

There are some other important things to know about some of the various views as to how the events of this book fit into history, which we will not take time for today. I may come back to that another time. But I do want to mention something of the contentious views regarding end-time events in general. Let me just outline some of the views regarding the sequence of end-times events. They all center on the biblical concept of the millennium – a 1000-year period in which Jesus Christ will reign and rule over the earth. (*Distribute chart of Revelation*)

**A-millennialism** – this view says there is no literal millennium. The millennium is to be understood symbolically. A spiritual form of the kingdom, present now, is the only kingdom God will establish on earth. Christ is reigning right now in heaven with the saints. At some time in the future, there will be a time of great trouble, following which Christ will return to take the believers to dwell in a new heaven and new earth.

**Post-millennialism** – In this view, the Christ's return to earth is seen to take place sometime after the millennium. This view also interprets the millennial reign of Christ figuratively. Rather than a literal 1000-year reign, Christ's kingdom must be progressively established on earth by the Church and after that, Christ will return. This is a prominent view in today's church—the belief that our purpose is to usher in the kingdom of Christ by taking control of the institutions of the world and making the world a better community.

**Pre-millennialism** - the doctrine that Jesus Christ will return to earth before the Millennium and establish a literal kingdom on earth for 1000 years. Charles Ryrie in his book *Basic Theology* writes: All forms of Pre-millennialism understand that the Millennium follows the Second Coming of Christ. Its duration will be 1,000 years: its location will be on earth and its government will be theocratic, with the personal presence of Christ reigning as King from Jerusalem.

One other prophetic element I must mention as background to our text today. That is the "Rapture." Rapture is not a biblical term, but the

concept is clearly spelled out in the Scriptures. The idea that at some point in time God will snatch away his children, and remove them from the earth is clearly described in passages like 1 Thess. 4:16-17 and 1 Cor. 15:51-53.

Again there are differing views as to when the rapture will take place. There are those who see believers going through the seven-year period we call the Great Tribulation. There are those who see the rapture taking place at some point midway through the tribulation. But as you will see on the chart I believe the rapture will precede and will mark the beginning of the Great Tribulation.

*Discuss the chart for a moment – The return of Christ in two parts – the Rapture and the Revelation.*

With all of that background let us go to the text. There are three components to what we see in this chapter that I want to focus on for a few minutes – the setting, the scene and the scenario.

## I. The Setting v. 1

“After this...” – after what? After John had been given the messages that were to be sent to the seven churches. He says, “...I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven!” John was being transported into the very presence of God in heaven. I cannot imagine the combination of exhilaration and fear that must have come over John as he found himself on the threshold of eternal glory and majesty.

But then he heard a voice – the voice that he had heard earlier. It was a voice that spoke with great authority—it sounded like a trumpet. *Look back at 1:10-11 – read them.* That same voice came to him with another message.

“Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” Again, after what? After we are finished with the churches. This is the beginning of John’s vision of the future. It is a future where the church has been removed and God is beginning to pour out his wrath in judgment on the nations and all those who have rejected Jesus Christ.

This is one of the reasons I believe the Rapture takes place prior to the beginning of this Tribulation period. In the first three chapters of

Revelation the focus is on the church. In chapters 4-18 the church is never mentioned. The focus is on Israel as God renews His covenant dealings with His chosen people. Then in the last three chapters, following the Second Coming of Christ, the church is again mentioned as we move through the Millennium into the New Heaven and the New Earth.

So the setting of this chapter finds John at the threshold of heaven about to view a scene that is thrilling and exhilarating, yet at the same time somewhat terrifying. Let’s look at...

## II. The Scene vv. 2-8

Immediately John finds himself carried by the Spirit into the future to see a scene in the heavens. There are a number of elements to this scene that we need to observe. Let’s just list them to begin with.

- A throne with one seated on the throne, surrounded by brilliance and radiance that could only be reflected by deity.
- Twenty-four other thrones surrounding the central throne, on which were seated elders, with white garments and golden crowns.
- In front of the throne there are seven torches of fire, and a great expanse that looked like crystal.
- Around the throne, four living creatures, like a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle. They each have six wings and are filled all over with eyes.

There is the scene. Now we need to consider what John was really seeing. There is little question that the one seated on the central throne was none other than the Lord God Almighty, the One described in Daniel 7 as the Ancient of Days.

*“As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire.” (Daniel 7:9 ESV)*

That sounds like the one John saw and described in chapter 1:12-16. Now what about the 24 elders and four living creatures? There are differing views on the identity of the 24 elders. (*Mention suggestions – 12 tribes and 12 apostles, Israel and the church*).

Look at the description. The white garments and golden crowns would indicate that these 24 elders represent the redeemed. But which redeemed? McArthur says,

Not Israel, since the nation is not yet saved, glorified, and coronated. That is still to come at this point in the events of the end. Their resurrection and glory will come at the end of the seven-year tribulation time. Tribulation saints aren't yet saved. Only one group will be complete and glorified at that point—the church. Here elders represent the church, which sings the song of redemption (5:8–10). They are the overcomers who have their crowns and live in the place prepared for them, where they have gone with Jesus.

So the 24 elders are the redeemed from the church age who are now gathered around the throne of God in heaven. What about the four living creatures?

The description of these creatures is interesting. We don't have time to go into detail, but there are two very high-ranking orders of angels in the Scriptures which come to mind – the seraphim and the cherubim. They are different and have different responsibilities in heaven. These creatures seem to have characteristics of both. My understanding is that they represent the entire angelic realm.

So, what we have in this scene in heaven is God on the throne, surrounded by the redeemed saints and the heavenly angelic beings. Let's now look at...

### III. The Scenario vv. 8-11

*Read v. 8.* The first thing we note is that the angelic beings are worshipping God and exalting Him for His intrinsic attributes—His holiness, His power, and His eternal nature.

One of the primary responsibilities or tasks of the angels is worship. "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" I cannot help but think of the vision that Isaiah had of the nature and character of God.

*"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he cov-*

*ered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"*" (Isa. 6:1-3 ESV)

Holiness is the essence of who God is, and over and over, the angels declare that aspect of his nature. He is holy. He is also the Almighty one, all-powerful, infinite in power and might. He is also the eternal one—the one who was and is and is to come. His eternal nature is repeated again in verses 9 and 10 in the phrase, "...who lives forever and ever..."

As the chorus of the four living creatures swells, we see something else happening. Look at vv. 9-11 – *read them.*

The 24 elders, who represent the redeemed saints from all the ages, fall down in worship before the one who is on the throne. Not only do they worship, offering all praise and glory to him, but they cast their crowns at His feet. What crowns? Well there are several crowns mentioned in the NT.

- 2 Timothy 4:6-8 – Paul's final testimony – crown of righteousness
  - James 1:12 – "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive **the crown of life**, which God has promised to those who love him."
- Jesus also mentions the crown of life in his message to the church in Smyrna – see Rev. 2:10
- In his first epistle, Peter speaks of the crown of glory promised to servants who faithfully shepherd the flock of God. 1 Peter 5:4 – "And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

In this scene in heaven we see the saints falling before the throne of God, and casting their crowns at His feet in a sign of recognition that He alone is worthy of these crowns. In fact, that is the message of their worship. *Read v. 11 again.*

I would like to read a quote from the ESV Study Bible:

The elders extol God as **worthy** of threefold tribute (**glory, honor, power**) because he exerts his sovereign **will** in creating and sustaining all things. God receives "power," not in the sense that an omnipotent being can become stronger, but in the sense that the strength of his creatures is used to honor him. These praises of God for his eternal perfection and creative

achievement are the prelude to a "new song," which will laud God and the Lamb for redemption, the climactic display of their divine worthiness (5:9–10).

## Conclusion

Well, we need to wrap this up. What can we say? How can we apply this to where we are today? I have struggled with this all week, but I want to simply make a couple of points.

1. First, some day life as we know it today will come to an end. The Rapture will take place and the redeemed will join the angels around the throne worshipping God because He is the one who is worthy. Are you ready for that day? Invitation...
2. We cannot, in our wildest imagination, comprehend what it will be like. The scene John describes is one like we have never experienced here on earth. But if you know the Lord Jesus as your Saviour, and you have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, through faith in Him, then you will be there. You will be part of that crowd of the redeemed saints bowing in worship and adoration of the one who is worthy of all worship.

I don't know about you, but the thought of what that will be like kind of gives me goosebumps. But it also makes me want to live closer to Him, the One who redeemed me by his blood, and who is worthy of all glory and honor and power.