

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Understanding the Symbols Around God's Throne

Rev. 4:1-11

INTRODUCTION:

Today we are going to go through the same chapter as we did two weeks ago. Last time we found ourselves in the throne room of God. We got a glimpse of heaven and saw angels continuously worshipping God. On earth we can only see the things that are going on around us and it appears that Satan is running rampant and everything is out of control. But Jesus reveals to us through John's second vision that, in reality, God is reigning and in control.

What we did not have time to do last time was to look at the symbolism and unravel it so it makes sense. It is so easy to read this apocalyptic language and throw up our hands in total despair wondering what in the world is John trying to tell us here.

My purpose as we go through Revelation is to give you a good and clear eschatology.

Do you know what eschatology is?

Eschatology has to do with the study of the last things. You need to have a clear eschatology because it is going to have tremendous implications on how you go about living your life in the world today. Having the wrong eschatological view can lead to some sloppy and careless application in your life. So it is important for us that we have a good eschatology in order to understand the world we live in and understand the events that are going on in the world without just coming undone at the seams with every new event that pops up in the news. But instead keep a bearing about ourselves and be able to live our life in this period of time between the first coming and second coming of Christ. This is a time that the Bible refers to as the **last days**.

With that in mind we roll back into a new section of Revelation. We just finished the letters to the seven churches in chapter 3. Now we step back into chapter 4 where we read and see, with John, his second vision.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Revelation 4 (NASB)

4 After 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." ² Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. ³ And 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. 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.

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. 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.”

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.”

Prayer

As we read this scripture you probably saw the allusions taken from Ezekiel, Daniel, and many other books of the Old Testament. There 404 verses in Revelation and over 516 allusions to the Old Testament. John's primary source is the Old Testament.

The imagery is littered throughout this passage. **None of it is new!** All of these images exist elsewhere else in scripture. When we read this we get the big picture but we don't quite get the details or what they are intending to communicate to us. So what I want to do with this vision is to walk through it and interpret these elements within the vision.

BODY:

I. THE GLORY OF GOD.

It is clear that this is a vision of God's throne in heaven. We know so by the description of the one on the throne and we know so by the description of what is going on around the throne, specifically the worship that is taking place of the One on the throne. Both the four living creatures and the 24 elders are all bowing before Him and proclaiming Him to be the Lord God.

So in the grand sense, this is what is going on. We see in verse 2 that John is actually summoned up in the spirit into heaven. This is the same way that many of the Old Testament prophets were given these prophetic visions. They were transformed in the spirit. What that is saying is that they were exalted to a place where the Spirit was now revealing and showing these visions to them. That is what is going on here with John. He is summoned up in the spirit into heaven where he sees all of these things taking place.

In verse 2 we are told that he sees a throne with One sitting upon it Who has the appearance of jasper and sardius. Encircling the throne was a rainbow in a complete circle having the appearance of an emerald.

It does not appear that John sees God Himself. That is because God is a spirit. But what he sees on the throne and around the throne is brilliant colors revealing the glory of God! Precious stones are often used to describe God's glory in visionary scenes. We will see this again later on in Revelation 21. Again John is carried away in the spirit. The same language. There he sees the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven and describes it as having the glory of God.

Revelation 21:11 (NASB)

¹¹ having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper.

This precious gem is clearly used to reveal the glory of God. So the radiance of the glory of God is like jasper. So the description of these stones are descriptions of the glory of God as these stones would refract light in all of these various colors. So all around the throne would come forth this **bursting** out of color. That is what John sees here, the glory of God radiating forth in colorful brilliant light.

II. THE 24 ELDERS.

But the scene is not only of the One on the throne. But it is also of those around the throne. So initially what he sees is these 24 thrones and seated on these thrones are 24 elders clothed in white garment and having golden crowns on their heads.

So, who and what are these 24 elders? There certainly is much debate about it, but one thing we know is that numbers are always symbolic in Revelation. They are not to be taken literally. So when we come across this number 24 we have to ask, what does this represent?

When we see the number 12 and its multiples (24, 12,000, 144,000) in symbolic language, the number generally refers to the people of God.

Most commentators believe that it refers to the 12 tribes of Israel, **representing** the people of God in the Old Testament period and the 12 apostles, **representing** the people of God in the New Testament period, or the last days. **After all, John was an apostle** and he clearly had not died and gone to heaven prior to the time of this vision. Thus combining these two sets together suggests that these 24 elders are angelic beings **representing** the **entire people of God** spanning the old and the new covenants.

Remember the seven letters to the seven churches that we just saw? The letters were addressed to the angel of the church of Ephesus; the angel of the church of Smyrna; the angel of the church of Pergamum; etc. What we realize from all of that is that there are angelic representatives of the church. What we find then is that these 24 elders are most likely 24 angelic representatives of God's people.

The fact that these elders are seated on their thrones, clothed in white, and have golden crowns on their head points to the destiny of all those whom they represent. White represents purity. The golden crowns represent honor and authority. In contrast to this image of the golden crown worn by each of the elders, Jesus is crowned with many crowns in Revelation 19:12. His **superior** authority is indicated by the multiples of crowns that He wears.

Think again to the first vision of the seven letters to the seven churches. Remember the things that Jesus said to the churches? He often refers "to the one who overcomes".

What are some of the things that are promised to those who overcome? Jesus says, "They will walk with Me in white". "They will sit with me on my throne". "They will rule over the nations". "They will be given the crown of life". These things that He promised belongs to those who overcome. We see these same descriptions exhibited by our angelic representatives. So you have the assurance that all of these things are waiting for you in heaven.

Now along with this we are told that there came "**flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder**".

You remember the scene at Mt. Sinai where Moses saw the burning bush that was not being consumed in Exodus 3. These are ways in which God's presence and glory is manifested as His phenomena disrupts the natural order. **His glory is so great and spectacular!** This is just revealing God's presence in a way that all readers of the scripture would recognize as the magnificence of God.

Then John says he sees "**seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God**". Again, just as we saw with the seven letters and the seven churches, the number seven throughout Revelation symbolizes completeness. So just as the seven churches refer to all of churches between Christ's first and second coming, the seven Spirits of God would refer to the complete Spirit, or the Holy Spirit just as it did in chapter 1 of Revelation. It does not refer to seven Spirits but to the fullness or completeness of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. So the fullness of God's Spirit is in the throne room as well. The presence of the Spirit is seen by the fact that there are "**seven lamps of fire burning before the throne**" indicating His brilliance and magnificence.

Remember what happened to the apostles on the Day Pentecost in Acts?

Acts 2:1-4 (NASB)

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. **4** And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

The fire was symbolically stating that the Holy Spirit and was coming and resting on each believer. We are promised the Holy Spirit when we repent and are baptized.

Acts 2:36-38 (NASB)

36 Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

37 Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” **38** Peter *said* to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This is how we overcome. This is how we escape the clutches of Satan. By the blood of Christ (the Lamb).

John also says that "before the throne *there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal*". Throughout scripture the sea represents chaos, disorder, and unrest. In Revelation 13 John sees an evil beast emerge from the sea.

Revelation 13:1-4 (NASB)

13 And the dragon stood on the sand of the seashore.

Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns *were* ten diadems, and on his heads *were* blasphemous names. ² And the beast which I saw was like a leopard, and his feet were like *those* of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne and great authority. ³ *I saw* one of his heads as if it had been slain, and his fatal wound was healed. And the whole earth was amazed *and followed* after the beast; ⁴ they worshiped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?"

Biblically speaking, the sea is a place of unrest and chaos. But you will notice that the sea in heaven is much different. John says that "before the throne *there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal*". The sea is calm like glass.

There are times when I look out over the lake behind our house and notice that the surface is perfectly calm and it acts like a mirror. At night all of the lights from the houses across the lake reflect on it and it is beautiful. This is the type of sea that John is describing. What this is indicating is, that in heaven, there is no **chaos**. There is no **turmoil**. There is no **unrest**. There is no place for the beast to emerge from. It is a place of peace and tranquility. And it is all around God's throne and heaven.

III. THE FOUR LIVING CREATURES.

And then lastly, John sees around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. The first creature, we are told, is like a lion. The second like a calf; the third having the face of a man; and the fourth like an eagle in flight. Each of them have six wings, eyes all around, and day and night they never cease to say "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who **was** and who **is** and who **is to come**".

We see this, among other places, in Isaiah.

Isaiah 6:1-3 (NASB)

6 In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called out to another and said,

"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory."

We understand from Ezekiel and Isaiah that these are angelic beings. But they are depicted this way for a reason. They are meant, once again, to represent something. This is visionary. So this scene is not literal, but symbolic.

So what does this represent? The number **four** in Revelation represents the **earth**. We see this in Revelation. The earth is said to have four corners. The compass points in four directions: North, East, South, and West. The earth is also said to have four winds, which again would be the four different directions of the wind. The earth is also divided into

four regions. There is the earth; there is the sea; there is the rivers and springs; and there are the heavens. So you see all over Revelation the earth is symbolized by the number **four**. These four creatures then represent the entire created order, God's entire creation. We see the entire creation praising and giving honor and glory to God.

Not as they are actually speaking, but as Jesus said during His triumphal entry when the Pharisees asked Jesus to rebuke His disciples for praising Him. And Jesus answered, “**I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!**”

The scriptures tell us that the heavens declare the glory of God. This is now personified by these angelic beings. Everything that God has created will bow down and worship Him.

Romans 14:11 (NASB)

¹¹ For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall give praise to God.”

We sing this at the end of each worship service. **He is Lord!**

These beings look like the earth's great creatures: the lion, the man, the calf, and the eagle. The angelic beings represent the entire created order, but they are still angelic beings and these angelic beings have two functions. You will notice that they surround the throne. As they surround the throne, they serve as royal guardians who keep God's sanctuary from being defiled. They **are full of eyes around and within** meaning that nothing escapes their notice.

We see this going all the way back to Adam and Eve when they fell in the garden. Remember how there was an angelic being placed there in the garden with a sword that turned every direction to protect the garden? Now that sin has taken place and all of mankind is defiled, no one goes back into this sanctuary on their own.

So these angelic beings serve as guardians of God's sanctuary. But at the same time, you also see, as in chapter 6 when you get to the seven seals that are opened up, that the ones who are carrying out this judgment of the seals are these same angelic beings. In this role they are not just guarding God's sanctuary, but they are also executing these judgments. So this is their two-fold function.

All of this combined is the entire vision. This is everything that is going on. **This vision was given so we could see the greatness, the grandeur, the glory, the splendor of God!** In fact the one major theme in Revelation would be the glory of God. That is the constant overarching theme in Revelation. So this vision is meant to display that glory!

CONCLUSION:

I hope that this helps clarify the symbolic language that John is using in this chapter and that it helps you to understand the glory of God and heaven. May it help us as we strive to OVERCOME!

He is Lord!