

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

WEEK 5: CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER 4

- We are now beginning the final section of the book of Revelation.
- **Chapter 1:19a** “Therefore, write the things which you *have seen...*” (the past)
- **Chapter 1:19b** “...and the things *which are...*” (the present)
- **Chapter 1:19c** “...and the things which *will take place after these things.*” (the future)
- **Chapter 4** starts *and the things which will take place after these things.*
- In fact, from chapter 4 – 22 we have the entire unfolding of the final events of this age.
- **Chapters 4-5:** A Prologue to the final section.
 - Chapters 4 and 5 are the introduction and background of the tremendous sweep of prophetic events predicted in the rest of the book. If chapter 4 and succeeding chapters relate to the future, they provide an important clue concerning the interpretation of the vision and the prophetic events which unfold in those chapters. (Walvoord)
- **Chapters 6-19:** The Tribulation and Great Tribulation
 - Daniel’s 70th week
 - **Daniel 9:24-27**
 - The time of Jacobs distress (trouble)
 - **Jeremiah 30:7** “Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; and it is the time of Jacob's distress, but he will be saved from it.”
 - The Day of the Lord (not a *day* but a prolonged period that beings after the rapture)
 - **Zephaniah 1:15-16** “A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, {16} a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and the high corner towers.”
- **Chapter 20:** The Millennium Kingdom (1000-year reign of Christ on the physical earth)
- **Chapters 21-22:** The Eternal State (New Heavens and Earth)

4:1: JOHN'S INVITATION TO COME TO HEAVEN

- A normal interpretation of this section which understands these prophecies as literal events would require that they be viewed as future. (Walvoord)
 - Starting in **chapter 4**, the rest of our reading is still waiting to be fulfilled.
- **Revelation 4:1** “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.’”
- The expression “after this” (Gr., *meta tauta*), [these things] with which verse one begins, identifies the revelation as subsequent to that of chapters 2 and 3. John, having been the channel of revelation to the seven churches existing in the first century, now is being introduced to a new field of prophecy. (Walvoord)
 - The actual Greek is plural...not *this* but *these things* is a more accurate translation.
- What are the *these things*? All that John just said about the churches and what was taking place.
- This is a very significant phrase as it clearly delineates a change of focus. The focus of chapters 2-3 was on the church age and now the focus has shifted.
- John heard a voice like a trumpet, the voice of Jesus Himself, calling to him to come up to where Jesus was already standing.
- This phrase, *come up here* is an imperative command in biblical Greek.
 - “The command does not anticipate any self-effort on the part of John to enter heaven but is rather an announcement of the purpose of God to show him that which will ‘be hereafter’ or, better translated, that which will ‘be after these things.’” (Walvoord)
- **Is this the rapture of the church?** Not exactly, Jesus only called John to come up...not everyone.
- The church is mentioned **19 times in chapters 1-3...0 times in the rest of Revelation**
 - Except **Revelation 22:16** “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”
 - This is simply a recap, not anything which is new to the churches.
- While speaking about the church in Philadelphia, Jesus said in **Revelation 3:10** “Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, *I also will keep you from the hour of testing*, that hour which is about to *come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.*”
 - This is a future event (...which is about to come...) that has more than just one church in mind (the whole world...those who dwell on the earth).

- In fact, as MacArthur says, “[this] must refer to the time of tribulation, the 7 year period before Christ’s earthly kingdom is consummated, featuring the unleashing of divine wrath in judgments expressed as seals, trumpets, and bowls. This period is described in detail throughout chaps. 6–19.”¹
- Further, “The verb ‘keep’ is followed by a preposition whose normal meaning is ‘from’ or ‘out of’—this phrase, ‘keep ... from’ supports the pretribulational rapture of the church.”²
- While **4:1** does not describe the rapture of the church, it is clear that the church is no longer present on earth when John was taken into the clouds.
 - The church is no longer mentioned, Jesus said He would keep the church from the hour of testing, and the church will not experience God’s wrath which is what the Tribulation period is.
 - **Thessalonians 1:10** “...and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.”
 - **1 Thessalonians 5:9** “For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ...”

4:2-3: THE THRONE AND AN INTIMATE VIEW OF HEAVEN

- “Therefore, the Revelation proper begins with the ultimate and eternal fact of God enthroned and ruling in his universe. However fearful or uncontrolled the forces of evil on earth may seem to be, they cannot annul or eclipse the greater fact that behind the scenes God is on his throne governing the universe.”³
- **Revelation 4:2-3** “Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. 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.”
- Notice the time aspect...immediately...from the call in **verse 1**.
- In the Spirit is not about sleeping or dreaming, “he is experiencing being in the presence of God and seeing these glorious visions.” (Walvoord)
- The first object in heaven that catches his gaze was the throne of God.
- “The throne is the central theme of John’s vision, mentioned 11 times in chapter 4, 5 times in chap 5 and 45 times in the whole book (the word “throne” is only used 15 times in the rest of the NT). Revelation is a throne book and everything in this chapter can be explained with regards to how it relates to the throne. John tells us who is on the throne, what is going on around the throne, what comes from the throne, who

¹ *The MacArthur Study Bible: NASB*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), Re 3:10.

² *Ibid.*

³ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 70.

stands before the throne, who is in the center and around the throne. The throne is the center of heaven and the focal point of God's presence.⁴

- It is first of all important to note that this is a throne in heaven, a reminder of the sovereignty of God who is far removed from the petty struggles of earthly government. Here is the true picture of the universe as being subject to the dominion of an omnipotent God. (Walvoord)
- “Therefore, the Revelation proper begins with the ultimate and eternal fact of God enthroned and ruling in his universe. However fearful or uncontrolled the forces of evil on earth may seem to be, they cannot annul or eclipse the greater fact that behind the scenes God is on his throne governing the universe.”⁵
- God the Father is similarly described in Isaiah 6:1; Daniel 7:9-10; Ezekiel 1:26-28.
- The throne is not really a piece of furniture as it represents God's rule over all the earth.
- Notice that John does not try and describe God but rather just *He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and sardius in appearance.*
 - “God is portrayed as the brilliance of light reflected from precious stones.”⁶
 - **Psalm 104:2** “Covering Yourself with light as with a cloak, Stretching out heaven like a tent curtain.”
- What do these stones mean? There are many different ideas...
 - “Rather than assigning specific qualities to each of the gems it is better to take them as part of the overall portrayal. They describe in symbolic form the majesty of God, resplendent and clothed in unapproachable light.”⁷
- This is why John uses the word **like 9 times** in this chapter to **try** and describe what he is seeing and experiencing in heaven.
- This is why it is so very important to **read the words of the Bible!** This is the absolute best John could do with the knowledge and language that he had available to him.
- In **verse 3** John does say that he sees a rainbow. This is a reminder of God's faithfulness to Noah that He would “never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth.” (Gen. 9:11-17)
 - You can also see this reference to God in **Ezekiel 1:27-28** “Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and there was a radiance

⁴ <https://www.mbcmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Revelation-4.doc.pdf>

⁵ Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 70.

⁶ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 120.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120–121.

around Him. {28} As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.”

- It makes one wonder if this was seen by John so that he would remember God’s faithfulness with the massive amount of judgment and wrath coming to the earth.
 - Just as God made (and has kept) His covenant with Noah, so He will keep His promises to Israel and the world, even though it is going to be devastating. (Ps 2:8-9; 110)⁸

4:4: THE THRONE AND THE 24 ELDERS

- First point to notice is that the focus is not the 24 thrones, nor the 24 elders, but *the* throne in which all of these other thrones were around.
- God the Father is still the focal point of John’s vision.
- We do not specifically know who these elders are as the text does not tell us. (more in chapter 5)
- We do know why they are not though.
- They are not angels; angels are never on thrones.
- They are not tribulation saints; the tribulation has not started yet.
- They are not Israel; Israel has not yet been redeemed that the OT saints are resurrected at the 2nd coming⁹.
- “Identification of the twenty-four elders should not be dogmatically held, but such evidence as there is, seems to point to the conclusion that they may represent the church as the Body of Christ.” (Walvoord)
- These 24 elders, because of their description (clothed in white, crowns on their heads), could easily represent all the raptured and glorified saints as the church age has come to an end.
 - **Revelation 19:8** “It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.”
 - **1 Peter 5:4** “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

4:5: THE THRONE...LIGHTNING...THUNDER...7 SPIRITS

- **Revelation 4:5** “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...”
- Once again, John’s gaze is upon the throne. This time, instead of the glorious view of what was like jewels and precious stones, he sees something terrifying.

⁸ Charles Ryrie, *Revelation, in Everyday Bible Commentary*, 51.

⁹ See Daniel 12:1-2, 13 and also 1 Thessalonians 4:16. Paul uses the phrase *dead in Christ* which would exclude those outside of the church age.

- This is reminiscent of **Exodus 19:16** “So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.”
- As Walvoord also points out, “The lightnings, thundering’s, and voices which proceed from the throne are prophetic of the righteous judgment of God upon a sinful world. They are similar to the thunders, lightnings, and voice of the trumpet which mark the giving of the law in Exodus 19:16 and are a fitting preliminary to the awful judgments which are to follow in the great tribulation as God deals with the earth in righteousness.”
- **Revelation 8:5** “Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake.”
- John also saw 7 lamps of fire burning before the throne...he says they were the 7 Spirits of God.
 - This was already mentioned in 1:4 and 3:1 and was said to be, “best understood as a representation of the Holy Spirit in a sevenfold way rather than seven individual spirits which would require that they be understood as seven angels.” (Walvoord) (see Isaiah 11:2-5).

4:6-8: BEFORE AND AROUND THE THRONE

- **Revelation 4:6-8** “...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.’”
- We read these verses and are blown away by the 4 living creatures. To be sure, it would have been a strange sight for John.
- But realize that John is still gazing at the throne of God. All of this is taking place in the throne room of God and before John.
- We know that this *sea of glass* is not a real sea of water. Once again, notice the word **like** John uses.
 - **Revelation 21:1** “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.” (not *like*, but really no longer any sea)
- There is no explanation of what this *sea of glass* is or what is for before the throne.
- As Walvoord says, “As in other portions of the book of Revelation, however, John expects the reader to draw conclusions from similar scenes elsewhere in the Bible.”

- We know that there was a similar scene in **Exodus 24:9-10** “Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, {10} and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself.”
- But what it is or represents, we don’t really know. “...no explanation is given in the text.” (Walvoord)
- To be honest, this *sea of glass* leaves John’s immediate gaze when his eyes fall upon the 4 creatures.
- These 4 living creatures have completely confused biblical commentators for centuries.
 - It is important to not forget the word **like** in **verse 7**.
- There are many, many interpretations...some plausible and others outright ridiculous.
- There is a similar description of these living creatures from Ezekiel’s vision in Ezekiel 1:4-25.

Possible Interpretations for the 4 Living Creatures (taken directly from Walvoord)

- Some interpret the four living creatures as representative of the attributes or qualities of God presented to John here as living entities. This is probably the best interpretation. Just as the Holy Spirit is represented by seven lamps, so the attributes of God in general are represented by the four living ones. The fact that the creatures are full of eyes is taken as significant of the omniscience and omnipresence of God who sees all and knows all.
- In a similar way the four beasts as respectively a lion, a calf, a man, and an eagle are considered different aspects of divine majesty. All of these are supreme in their respective categories. The lion is the king of beasts and represents majesty and omnipotence. The calf or ox, representing the most important of domestic animals, signifies patience and continuous labor. Man is the greatest of all God’s creatures, especially in intelligence and rational power; whereas the eagle is greatest among birds and is symbolic of sovereignty and supremacy.
- Comparison has also been made of the four living creatures to the four Gospels which present Christ in four major aspects of His person. As the lion, He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, represented as the king of Matthew. As the calf or ox, He is the Servant of Jehovah, the faithful one of Mark. As man, He is the human Jesus, presented in the Gospel of Luke, and as the eagle, He is the divine Son of God presented in the Gospel of John. Alford thinks that this has the least to commend itself of all of the many diverse interpretations. (First interpretation from Victorinus, d. 303 AD)
- Scott observes that ancient rabbinical writers declared that the tribes of Israel pitched their tents and standards on the four sides of the Tabernacle in this same order; namely, the tribe of Judah, a lion; the tribe of Ephraim, an ox; the tribe of Reuben, a man; the tribe of Dan, an eagle. (Num 2:2)
- An alternative explanation is that the four living creatures are angels whose function it is to bring honor and glory to God. Angels as seen in the Scriptures vary widely in their appearance, and this explanation is a plausible one. Angels are frequently seen in the Bible especially in apocalyptic books of the Bible such as Ezekiel and Revelation. The fact that the living creatures have six wings as do the seraphim of Isaiah 6:2-3 adds weight to the interpretation that they are angels. The living creatures in Revelation 4 and the seraphim of Isaiah 6 have a similar function in that both ascribe holiness to the Lord of hosts (cf. Isa. 6:3).
- **What is the purpose of these 4 living creatures?** They are worshipping the Lord and “do not cease to say, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy.’”
- These 4 living creatures may be the ones who are “leading the worship of God in heaven.”¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://www.mbcmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Revelation-4.doc.pdf>

- The worship of the Lord begins in chapter 4 with the living beings: 4:8 (a quartet)
 - This causes the 24 elders to worship: 4:9-11
 - Then the 4 living beings and the 24 elders' worship together: 5:8-10
 - Then it grows from there so that many thousands of angels join in: 5:11-12
 - Finally, the concert of praise to the Lord is so comprehensive that it includes every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth: 5:13.
- When we finally get to heaven, there is going to be a continual worship of God the Father.

4:9-11: WORSHIP TO THE ONE ON THE THRONE

- **Revelation 4:9-11** “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 does true worship look like from God's people?

- It is aimed at God the Father. Worship is not about us, not about what we have, not about anything other than God Himself.
 - They are giving glory, honor, and thanks to God.
 - They are not worshipping heaven, the things created in heaven or any other person than God the Father on the throne.
- It is filled with humility. In **verse 10**, the 24 elders fall down before God the Father to worship.
 - They not only fall down in posture, but also in heart as they cast their crowns before Him.
 - Their actions match their profession. They are not hypocrites, what they say they believe they are living out before the throne of God.
 - “Further, in casting their crowns before the throne they testify that if it had not been for God's grace, salvation, and goodness, they could not have had victory over sin and death. Here the creature honors His Maker and accepts the dictum that man necessarily must be subject to his Creator.”
(Walvoord)
- **On a side note**, this is what brings most people to believe that when we get to heaven, we too will cast our crowns before the throne.
 - If the 24 elders represent the church, then this is quite possible what is going to happen.

- While the Bible does not say that all saints will do this, I do believe that when we get to heaven, we are going to know that it was not upon our own merit but God’s power that brought us home.
- Furthermore, this is one more “evidence” of the rapture of the church. These elders, if they are truly representative of the church, then the church is already there **before** the tribulation.

How does right doctrine motivate right worship?

- **God is holy. (holy, holy, holy)**
 - “Holiness is the only one of God’s attributes so repeated, since it is the summation of all that He is. God’s holiness is His utter and complete separation from evil in any way and every form. He is absolutely untainted by any evil, error, or wrongdoing – unlike angels (some of whom sinned) or humans (all of whom sinned).”¹¹
- **God is sovereign. (sits on the throne...because of Your will they existed, and were created)**
 - He is in complete control...the only wise ruler.
- **God is eternal. (lives forever and ever)**
 - He has no beginning and no end...God is *I am*.
- **God is worthy (worthy are You...this is a main theme in chapter 5, verses 2, 4, 9, 12)**
 - Because of all that God has done, He is the only one who is truly worthy of our praise and adoration.
- **God is all-powerful. (He created *all things*)**
 - God is devoid of any weakness. He is never changing and is all powerful.
- **God is self-existent (all things exist because of Him)**
 - There is nothing that was before God and all things only exist because of God.
 - God does not exist because something else has given Him life. He is the ultimate life-giver.
- Ultimately, our worship is not about us, it is not about our emotions, it is not about being in the right place or with the right people. Our worship of the Lord is acceptable before Him when it is aimed at Him and driven by our knowledge of Him.
- “The world today does not give such honor to the Lord God. Though men benefit from His goodness and live in a universe of His creation, they tend to neglect the worship of God. One of the important aims of the book of Revelation is to trace the divine movement of history toward the goal of universal recognition of God.” (Walvoord)

¹¹ John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, in the MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 155.