

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 4-7-13 PM Notes
"THE PRIORITY IN HEAVEN"
REVELATION 4:1-11
#10 in Series, "Verse-by-Verse Through Revelation"

Revelation 1:19 (NKJV) "Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this."

Meta tauta—Greek for "after this"

Revelation 22:16a (NKJV) "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches."

Introduction (v. 1)

Revelation 1:10 (NKJV) "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet."

2 Corinthians 12:2-4 (NKJV) "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. ³ And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

I. The Throne (v. 2a)

Psalms 103:19 (NKJV) "The Lord has established His throne in Heaven, and His kingdom rules over all."

Psalms 47:8 (NKJV) "God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne."

Isaiah 14:13 (NKJV) "For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north.'"

II. On the Throne (vv. 2b-3a)

Ezekiel 1:26-28 (HCSB) "²⁶ The shape of a throne with the appearance of sapphire stone was above the expanse. There was a form with the appearance of a human on the throne high above. ²⁷ From what seemed to be His waist up, I saw a gleam like amber, with what looked like fire enclosing it all around. From what seemed to be His waist down, I also saw what looked like fire. There was a brilliant light all around Him. ²⁸ The appearance of the brilliant light all around was like that of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day. This was the appearance of the form of the Lord's glory. When I saw [it], I fell facedown and heard a voice speaking."

Revelation 21:11b (HCSB) "... a very precious stone, like a jasper stone, bright as crystal."

Deuteronomy 4:24 (NKJV) "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."

"John is permitted to actually see the Lord of the universe on His throne. And how does the apostle describe what he sees? *Colors!* Pure, flashing, jewel-like colors, like the blazing radiance cast off like a prism...Moses was once told that no man can see the face of God and live. No one, not even John, has ever seen the face of God at any time. All that anyone has ever seen are those manifestations of His being which tell us of His attributes and His glory. John saw a figure seated on the throne of Heaven, but the features of that figure were lost in the dazzling nimbus of lights that surrounded the throne."

—Ray Steadman

III. Around the Throne (vv. 3b-4)

Revelation 5:9-10 (NKJV) ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, ¹⁰ and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.'

Revelation 3:18b (NKJV) "... buy from Me ... white garments, that you may be clothed..."

Revelation 19:8 (NKJV) "And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints."

IV. From the Throne (v. 5a)

V. Before the Throne (vv. 5b-6a)

Isaiah 11:2 (NKJV) "The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord."

Exodus 24:10 (HCSB) "and they saw the God of Israel. Beneath His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire stone, as clear as the sky itself."

VI. In and Around the Throne (vv. 6b-8a)

Isaiah 6:2-3 (NKJV) ² Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!'

VII. Toward the Throne (vv. 8b-11)

*Holy, Holy, Holy! All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Who wert and art, and evermore shalt be.*

—Reginald Heber (1826)

One of the subjects in the Bible that always rouses great interest in people is the subject of Heaven. Of all the questions I get about the Bible, I would estimate that questions about Heaven are at the top (or at least close to the top) of the list. Of all the questions about Heaven that we could ask, I believe that the most interesting one is, “What will we do in Heaven?” I think that most people secretly fear that Heaven will be boring. After all, we’re going to be there for an awfully long time – for eternity! Floating on a cotton candy cloud strumming a harp just doesn’t really whet most people’s appetite for Heaven! You may be surprised as we go through Revelation just how much the Bible tells us about what is going on in Heaven. Nowhere do we learn more about the activity in Heaven than in Revelation 4 and 5. These two chapters go together. Here is what we will discover: the activity of heaven is primarily worship. Wait! Don’t think in terms of a church worship service here on earth. I’ve been through some wonderful worship services here. The Tenebrae service on Palm Sunday night was one of the most moving worship services I’ve ever been in. The services on Easter Sunday morning and night were very special and moving. But the greatest worship services here on earth pale in comparison to the everyday worship in Heaven. Worship will not be a service that we attend there; worship will be our way of life. Worship of our great triune God without the hindrances we experience here on earth will be the activity of Heaven and it will be wonderful beyond words. It will never get boring because our God is an infinite being and it will take eternity to give Him the worship that our hearts will long to give Him and the worship that He is due. Our purpose for existence is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever and the primary way (not the only way) that we accomplish that purpose is through worship. While many people go to the book of Revelation to satisfy their curiosity about the future here on earth, chapters four and five tell us more about our future in Heaven.

Chapter four begins that last section of Revelation that is outlined for us in **Revelation 1:19 (NKJV)** “Write the things which you have seen [Chapter 1 – the glorified Christ], and the things which are [the seven churches in chapters two and three], and the things which will take place after this.” Allow me to point out something that is a little more obvious in the Greek text than it is in the English translations. Look at the last two words in Revelation 1:19: “after this” is *meta tauta* in the Greek text. Look now at the first words of Revelation 4:1 – “After these things”. These are the same words in the Greek as in 1:19 (*meta tauta*). Look at the last two words in 4:1 – “after this”, which is the same words in the Greek (*meta tauta*). The best translation of *meta tauta* is “after these things”. What is this phrase, “after these things” referring to? It is referring to the content of chapters two and three! It is referring to the churches – these seven churches that were historical, but also representative of all churches throughout church history. It is interesting that while the church is so prominent in chapters two and three, the word “church” disappears in chapter four and the word “church” isn’t found again until **Revelation 22:16a (NKJV)** “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches.” In chapter 19, the “bride” refers to the church, but the actual word “church” isn’t used between Revelation 3:22 and 22:16. **We are not going to deal tonight with why the church disappears because I don’t want to take anything away from the real theme of chapters four and five.** However, I did want to point that out and we will come back to it sometime after we finish chapter five.

Introduction (V1)

John is called up to Heaven. Was John in his literal body or was it simply a vision God gave him while his body stayed on the island of Patmos? John had heard this same voice that was like a trumpet before. In **Revelation 1:10 (NKJV)** we read “I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet”. That voice was the voice of Christ Himself. It was Christ who called for John to “come up here” in Revelation 4:1. When the Lord gives a command, He enables us to obey it. There was a door opened to Heaven and John was ushered into the presence of the Lord to see what takes place *meta tauta*, after the church age. Back to the question I asked earlier: was this a vision or was John literally lifted up from the Island of Patmos and transported to Heaven? We don’t know. The phrase “in the spirit” would seem to mean that he was not “in the body”, but we can’t be sure. The apostle Paul also was shown

Heaven and listen to what he said about whether he was bodily taken or just shown a vision. Paul is referring to himself in **2 Corinthians 12:2-4 (NKJV)** “²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows--such a one was caught up to the third heaven. ³And I know such a man--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- ⁴how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” The first heaven was the realm where the birds fly; the second heaven is where the sun, moon, and stars are. The third heaven is where God dwells. I doubt that John knew if he was bodily taken up or if he was simply given a vision of the reality of Heaven. In the final analysis, it doesn't matter that much. **What he sees is what is going on in Heaven.** It seems that before God gives the details of His poured out wrath, He gives John a glimpse of the thing that is priority in Heaven – worship. After we see the details of the great wrath that is to be released on earth, we will even more appreciate the contrast with what is going on in Heaven and what those in Heaven escape here on the earth.

I. The Throne (V2a)

The word “throne” is very important in Revelation 4-5. The word “throne” is used 45 times in Revelation and 14 times in Revelation 4. The focus of chapter four is not the beauty of Heaven; the focus is a throne and the one who sits upon it. We will be reminded over and over that no matter how chaotic things get on earth, God is still on His throne in total control. God's throne is symbolic in Scripture of His sovereign rule and authority. **Psalms 103:19 (NKJV)** “The Lord has established His throne in Heaven, and His kingdom rules over all.” The word “set” means that this throne is permanent. The one who is seated on this throne has always been seated there and always will be seated on it. **Psalms 47:8 (NKJV)** “God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne.” God is the permanent, unchanging sovereign ruler of the universe. His throne is **set** in Heaven. Only one being ever tried to take this throne. The rebel angel Lucifer said in **Isaiah 14:13 (NKJV)** “I will ascend into Heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God”. Lucifer's attempted coup failed miserably and now he awaits the lake of fire where he will spend eternity. Keep these truths about the throne of God in mind when we begin looking at the great tribulation being unleashed on earth. Whatever is happening on this earth, God is on His throne. Whatever is happening in your life right now, God is on His throne!

II. On the Throne (V2b-3a)

Human language is not capable of describing heavenly things. This explains why there is so much symbolism in the book of Revelation. If you've ever been on the top of Mt. LeConte on a clear day in peak color time in the fall, you cannot find words to describe what you see. That is a scene on this fallen earth; how much more so will we have difficulty with Heaven!

The one on the throne is God the Father because the Son approaches Him in Revelation 5:6 and the Holy Spirit is pictured before the throne in Revelation 4:5. No one can describe what God is like in His essence. John can only use comparisons. The language John uses has some similarity with the language of the prophet Ezekiel in **Ezekiel 1:26-28 (HCSB)** “²⁶The shape of a throne with the appearance of sapphire stone was above the expanse. There was a form with the appearance of a human on the throne high above. ²⁷From what seemed to be His waist up, I saw a gleam like amber, with what looked like fire enclosing it all around. From what seemed to be His waist down, I also saw what looked like fire. There was a brilliant light all around Him. ²⁸The appearance of the brilliant light all around was like that of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day. This was the appearance of the form of the Lord's glory. When I saw [it], I fell facedown and heard a voice speaking.” Do you sense the difficulty of these biblical writers when trying to put into words a description of One who is indescribable?

John describes the one on the throne using precious stones. Jasper is a clear stone – perhaps a diamond. Jasper is described in **Revelation 21:11 (HCSB)** as “...a very precious stone, like a jasper stone, bright as crystal.” The Jasper stone pictures His glory and purity. The sardius stone was bright red. It likely pictures the wrath of God. **Deuteronomy 4:24 (NKJV)** “For the Lord your God *is* a consuming fire, a jealous God.” The jasper and sardius stone were the first and last stones on the breastplate of the Old Testament

High Priest (Exodus 28:17-20). These stones may symbolize God's continuing covenant relationship with Israel.

Ray Steadman gives a great description of what John saw. "John is permitted to actually see the Lord of the universe on His throne. And how does the apostle describe what he sees? *Colors!* Pure, flashing, jewel-like colors, like the blazing radiance cast off like a prism." He goes on to say, "Moses was once told that no man can see the face of God and live. No one, not even John, has ever seen the face of God at any time. All that anyone has ever seen are those manifestations of His being which tell us of His attributes and His glory. John saw a figure seated on the throne of Heaven, but the features of that figure were lost in the dazzling nimbus of lights that surrounded the throne." [Ray Steadman, *God's Final Word*, Page 124].

III. Around the Throne (V3b-4)

The rainbow that God gave after the flood was a sign of God's covenant faithfulness, mercy and grace (Genesis 9:13-17). The dominant color of this rainbow was green. Green usually symbolizes life, and around the throne it symbolizes that God is the source of new life and new beginnings. This rainbow is not an arc but a complete circle. The circle symbolizes completeness and perfection. The One on the throne is faithful to keep His covenant promises. We are getting ready to see His judgment poured out, but for those in Heaven He is full of mercy and grace and new life. In His presence complete sufficiency.

In verse four, we see around His throne 24 other thrones and 24 Elders seated on them. What does this mean? Who are these 24 elders? There is a lot of disagreement even among great Bible scholars. Some say that they are angels, special angels that God directs to fulfill His purposes. There are many problems with seeing them as angels. The word "Elders" when it is used elsewhere in Scriptures always refers to human beings. Nowhere else in the Bible do we see angels sitting on thrones. The crowns on their heads seem to rule out angels since crowns (rewards) are never promised to them nor are they ever pictured as wearing them. In chapter five these elders sing to Lamb of God. **Revelation 5:9-10 (NKJV)** "9 And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, 10 And have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.'" No angel has been redeemed. I believe that the 24 elders picture the church. The number 24 is used in Scripture to speak of completion and representation. For example, there were 24 courses of priests in the Old Testament temple that represented all of the priests. In Revelation 1:6 believers are called priests. These elders I believe represent the church, the Bride of Christ (from Pentecost until the catching up of the church) now in Heaven around the throne.

Notice that these elders were clothed in white robes. We see this symbolism in other places in Revelation. To the Christians at Sardis, the Lord Jesus said that they would be clothed in white garments (Revelation 3:5). The Lord Jesus counseled the members of the church at Laodicea in **Revelation 3:18b (NKJV)** "...buy from Me... white garments, that you may be clothed..." At the marriage supper of the Lamb, we read in **Revelation 19:8 (NKJV)** "And to her [the bride of Christ, the church] it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints." The white garments symbolize the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers at salvation, and the resulting acts of righteousness that evidence that one has been given the righteousness of Christ.

What is the significance of the golden crowns on their heads? The Greek word translated "crown" literally means "the victor's crown". It was given as reward to those who endured trial, completed their race and were victorious. The picture here is of the church safe in Heaven around the throne worshipping the one who is seated on the throne and the Lamb. The church has been through the judgment seat of Christ and their reward for faithfulness has been given. The rewards are symbolized by the crowns.

IV. From the Throne (V5a)

What we read here pictures the power and might that emanates from God's throne. It reminds us of when God came down on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:16. What is pictured here in verse 5 is the coming

judgment on the earth. There is a sense of foreboding as those in Heaven sense that something awful is about to happen – the judgment of the great tribulation is about to commence. God’s throne is not only a throne of sovereignty; it is also a throne of judgment. Many of the judgments we will see in coming weeks are accompanied by lightning, thunder, and rumblings.

V. Before the Throne (V5b-6a)

John sees two things before the throne of God. First he sees seven lamps of fire that symbolize God the Spirit. We saw in 1:4 that there are not seven Holy Spirits. The number seven speaks of completeness and perfection. I believe that it also refers to the seven descriptions of the one Holy Spirit given in **Isaiah 11:2 (NKJV)** “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.” The Holy Spirit illuminates to the believer the Word of God and the guidance of God which is pictured by light.

John also saw before the throne a sea of glass, like crystal. There are a lot of theories as to what the sea of glass like crystal symbolizes. I don’t think that we can be dogmatic. I’ve read the theories and I believe that it is simply there for its beauty and splendor and brilliance. We see a similar description in **Exodus 24:10 (HCSB)** “and they saw the God of Israel. Beneath His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire stone, as clear as the sky itself.” We see a similar brilliance and beauty recorded in Ezekiel 1:22.

VI. In and Around the Throne (V6b-8a)

What may seem rather strange and unusual to us but these living creatures are closest to the throne of God (verse 6 “in the midst of the throne, and around the throne”). These living creatures (better “living beings”) are not animals though John uses animals to describe their appearance. There are such amazing parallels to what John saw and what the prophet Ezekiel saw that we can safely say that they are the same beings (see Ezekiel 1:4-25; 10:1-20). Ezekiel tells us that these living beings were Cherubim which is a high ranking order of angels that are often associated with God’s holiness and power. The living creatures also have similarities to the seraphim (another high ranking order of angels) who are seen around the throne of God in Isaiah 6. We read about them in **Isaiah 6:2-3 (NKJV)** “² Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one cried to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!’” I believe that we can assume that these living beings are Cherubim and Seraphim who surround the throne of God to continually give Him worship. The description of them being “full of eyes” in verse 6 and verse 8 emphasizes their full knowledge, alertness and wisdom. Adrian Rogers brings their description a little more down to earth when he calls them “God’s cheerleaders”.

These living beings (angels) each represent truths that we will see demonstrated in the judgments to follow. The lion represents power and majesty. The calf (ox) represents endurance; the man represents intelligence; the eagle represents speed in execution. These living beings (angels) also remind us that all creation worships God. They represent the four categories of creation we see outlined in Genesis 9:8-10. As we get into the judgment section of Revelation, we will see these living creatures doing the bidding of God related to His righteous judgment on earth. The wings likely represent their swiftness in carrying out all that God commands.

VII. Toward the Throne (V8b-11)

I would encourage you to not get too tied up with the appearance of these living beings and focus on their activity. The one activity that consumes them is worship! In this passage and in chapter five are five great hymns of praise that give us a better sense of what we will be doing in Heaven than any other passage. The hymns of praise begin with a quartet in verse 8 made up of the four living creatures. In verse 10 the 24 Elders (the church) joins in. In chapter 5:8 harps are added to the vocal praise. In 5:11 the rest of the angels join in and in 5:13 all of the created beings of the universe join in this mighty chorus of praise to God. The four living creatures are constant in their worship focusing on the central of God’s attributes – His holiness. To His holiness they add His omnipotence (“Lord God Almighty”) and then His eternity

(“who was and is and is to come”). As the living creatures praise Him, the Elders (the church) join in. In verse 10 the church changes their posture and adds an activity to their voices of praise. They fall prostrate on their faces before the throne in reverential awe and worship. What happens next is amazing. They cast their crowns before the throne. Remember that these crowns are rewards for work here to glorify Him. We will be so consumed with His glory and our unworthiness and the knowledge that all we did and suffered here was only by His enabling and we offer as a gift the only thing we have – we will cast our crowns before His throne in worship. I long to have crowns to cast as an offering before Him. The theme of the worship is the worthiness of God to receive it.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the hymn written by Reginald Heber in 1826 comes as close as any hymn this side of Heaven in verbalizing what we will be singing in Heaven. The second verse of this hymn says:

*Holy, Holy, Holy! all the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Who wert and art, and evermore shalt be.*