

"A THEOCENTRIC UNIVERSE"

I. Introduction

- A. This chapter is the beginning of a new visionary cycle in Revelation, a cycle that continues through the end of chapter 7.
1. It can be described as the vision of heaven and the seven seals.
 2. This is an appropriate time to reiterate that the visions in Revelation are not a chronological account of future events.
 3. Instead, they repeatedly cycle through the past, present, and future events in seven successive, parallel visions.
 4. The opening of the seven seals results in the unleashing of severe judgments upon those who dwell on the earth, which is symbolic of the suffering that people experience throughout this present age, culminating in the final judgment at the end of this age.
 5. The reason why the visionary sequence of the seven seals begins with the vision of God on his throne is in order to assure believers that everything is under God's control.
 6. It is a reminder that the universe is theocentric.
- B. In the field of astronomy, people used to think that the universe is geocentric, with the earth at the center of all things.
1. But in the sixteenth century, Nicolaus Copernicus posited heliocentrism, with the sun at the center of all things.
 2. While Copernicus' theory was at first controversial, it is now the accepted view.

3. Of course, we now know that the universe is far bigger than our solar system.
4. Our sun is just one star among billions in our galaxy, and our galaxy is just one among billions.
5. Revelation 4 declares that in the ultimate sense, the universe is neither geocentric nor heliocentric, but theocentric.
6. God is the governing, spiritual center of all things.
7. The book of Revelation stresses this point by its repeated use of the term "throne," which occurs forty-seven times throughout the book.
8. Revelation 4 and 5 play a pivotal role in the book as a whole.
9. They are patterned in numerous ways after the visions found in Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7.
10. They depict the beginning fulfillment of the end-time rule of the Son of Man, assuring the saints that God's plan for overcoming evil and establishing his kingdom is being put into effect by his Son.

II. The Lord on His Throne (1-3, 5-6a)

- A. We see a connection between Revelation 4 and the preceding chapters in verse 1, where John tells us that he sees a door standing open in heaven.
 1. The image of a door was used two times in Revelation 3.
 2. Jesus told the church in Philadelphia that he set an open door before them, which was symbolic of their opportunity for witness.
 3. Jesus also told the church in Laodicea that he was knocking on their door and calling them to renew their covenant relationship with them.

4. In both of those passages, the image of a door signifies access to fellowship with God.
 5. In the same way, in this chapter John is being given access into the heavenly throne room of God, where he is given a glimpse of worship in the heavenly sanctuary.
- B. Revelation 4:1 is made much of by dispensationalist interpreters.
1. But when we take a look at their claims, it becomes clear that this verse lends no support for the dispensationalist paradigm.
 2. First, dispensationalists claim that the command for John to “Come up here” is a reference to the rapture of the church prior to the great tribulation.
 3. This is a flagrant example of reading an idea into a text, or what is sometimes referred to as eisegesis.
 4. There is nothing in this passage or in the surrounding context to suggest that John is somehow representative of the church.
 5. The reason why he is told to come up to heaven is because this is how the vision was transmitted to him.
 6. It is another way of describing his experience of being “in the Spirit.”
 7. He was lifted up by the Holy Spirit out of the realm of space and time and brought into the spiritual realm, the realm that is hidden from human eyes.
 8. By the power of the Spirit, he was enabled to see the entire universe from a heavenly perspective.
- C. Dispensationalists also contend that the phrase “I will show you what must take place after this” is determinative for our interpretation of the rest of the book.

1. They say that this phrase indicates that chapters 2 and 3 dealt with events that will take place from the time of the first century up until the time of the rapture, and that the remainder of Revelation deals with things will unfold in the world after the rapture takes place.
 2. Now, as we have already noted, there is no rapture in Revelation 4:1.
 3. Dispensationalists read this idea into this verse.
 4. The same is true of the other passages that they cite as proof of the rapture, including 1 Thessalonians 4.
 5. There is no indication that the church is removed from the world prior to the events that are described in the remaining visions in Revelation.
 6. This means the phrase “what must take place after this” simply refers to what comes next in the sequence of visions that John is being given.
- D. Unlike Ezekiel when he had his vision of God on his heavenly throne, John does not attempt to give much of a description of the one seated on the throne.
1. The only thing that John says is that the one seated there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and a rainbow encircled the throne.
 2. This is a symbolic depiction of the divine radiance.
 3. The precious stones intensify the divine glory by reflecting it.
 4. The rainbow brings to mind the Noahic covenant, where God gave the rainbow as a sign to assure mankind that he will never again destroy the earth by a flood.
 5. This suggests that the rainbow around God’s throne is symbolic of his mercy, indicating that the judgments that are described in this

visionary sequence will not result in the destruction of God's people.

6. We have nothing to fear from the judgments that God sends upon the earth.
 7. For us, God's judgment has already fallen upon Christ, who was made a curse on our behalf.
- E. John says that lightning and thunder issued forth from the throne.
1. This brings to mind the theophany at Mount Sinai.
 2. It underscores God's holiness and reminds us that it is a fearful thing for a sinner to fall into the hands of the living God.
 3. The text also tells us that the seven torches that were in front of the throne were symbolic of the seven spirits of God.
 4. As we have noted previously in this series, this does not mean that there are seven Holy Spirits.
 5. Seven is symbolic of fullness, and the Spirit is described as sevenfold in order to show that he is the source of life for the church, which is also represented in its fullness in Revelation by the number seven.
- F. The last thing that John says about the throne is that there was a sea of glass before it.
1. This could be representative of several things at the same time.
 2. It may point to the basin that was in Solomon's temple, which was used for ritual washing.
 3. It may point to the parting of the Red Sea, which is described in Exodus 15:8 by the phrase "the deeps were congealed."

4. And it may point to Daniel 7 and the passages later in Revelation where the sea is an image for evil.
5. In those passages, the sea represents chaos and the forces of evil.
6. When John looks into the throne room of heaven, the unruly sea has been made as still as glass.
7. What a great comfort this is for us!
8. It tells us that our God is completely sovereign over evil.
9. Though things often seem chaotic and out of control in this present evil age, the reality is that God is in perfect control of everything.
10. In the end, he will subdue everything under his feet.

III. Those Around the Throne (4, 6b-11)

- A. In addition to telling us about the throne that he sees in this vision of the heavenly sanctuary, John then describes those who are around the throne.
 1. First, there are twenty-four thrones around it with twenty-four elders seated on them.
 2. It is significant that these elders are described in terms that recall what was promised to the churches in chapters 2 and 3.
 3. They are seated on thrones.
 4. They are dressed in white.
 5. They are wearing crowns.
 6. This indicates that these elders, who are probably angelic beings, are representative of the church.
 7. This is underscored by the fact that there are twenty-four of them.

8. The number twenty-four probably stands for the twelve sons of Jacob plus the twelve apostles.
 9. These beings are symbolic of the covenant people across all history.
- B. The other figures who are around the throne are these four living creatures with faces like a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle, respectively.
1. The fact that there are four of them indicates that they are representative of all animate life on the earth, since four is the number of global totality, as with the four directions on a map.
 2. This is also indicated by the kinds of creatures after which they are patterned.
 3. The lion is the chief of wild animals, the ox of domestic animals, man over all things, and the eagle over the birds.
 4. These creatures tell us something about the purpose of the created order.
 5. They depict all creation, with its varied abilities and uses, standing ready to serve the Lord and carry out his purposes.
 6. The similarity of these creatures with the ones in Ezekiel 1 also suggests that they are angelic servants who are ready to render service to God in any direction throughout the universe.
- C. After describing the elders and the living creatures, John then tells us what they do.
1. He begins with the living creatures, who never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"
 2. These angelic servants exist in order to ascribe glory to God and to declare who he is.

3. They declare that God is holy.
 4. Holiness has been described as the attribute of attributes.
 5. Jonathan Edwards even said that it is “more than a mere attribute of God... It is the sum of all His attributes, the outshining of all that God is.”
 6. The living creatures also refer to God by the title “Lord God Almighty” and repeat the designation of God as the one who was and is and is to come, which we have seen earlier in Revelation.
 7. These names emphasize that God transcends time and is sovereign over all history.
- D. The chapter concludes by telling us about the response of the elders to the worship of the living creatures.
1. The elders respond to this ceaseless worship by offering worship of their own.
 2. They fall down in reverence before the one seated on the throne.
 3. They cast their crowns before him, an act that symbolically says that the honor that has been bestowed on them is ultimately due to God alone.
 4. He receives all the glory for his work of bringing many sons to glory.
 5. The elders then give voice to this in their song, saying, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”
 6. God is worthy to be praised both for his works of redemption and his works of creation.

7. Because all creatures owe their existence to him, we owe him honor and thanks.
8. As Paul says in Romans 11:36, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

IV. Conclusion

- A. The central idea conveyed in Revelation 4 is something that you need to keep in the forefront of your thinking for as long as you live in this present age.
- B. You will probably not hear this truth expressed in the media or in your conversations with your neighbors, but it is the truth through which we need to interpret everything that takes place in our lives and in the world around us.
- C. In the words of William Hendriksen, "The newspapers and radio announcements give you the headlines and news-flashes. The magazines add the explanations. But these explanations are, after all, in terms of secondary causes. The real mind, the real will which — while fully maintaining the responsibility and freedom of the individual instruments — controls the universe is the mind, the will of the Almighty God! Nothing is excluded from his dominion." [84]