

Heaven's Throne Room

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Revelation 4,5

Following Jesus' messages to the seven churches, John is given a vision of God's throne room in heaven.

I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, "Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this." Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardine stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones, I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes, and they had crowns of gold on their heads. And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thundering, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God (Revelation 4:1-5)

Trying to Describe the Indescribable

This description of heaven's throne room reminds us of the judgment scene in heaven pictured in Daniel 7:9, 10. John's account contains more details, but both prophets describe the glory and brightness and grandeur of God and His throne. And yet, John seems to struggle somewhat to convey adequately what he saw. Have you ever thought about how difficult it would be to accurately express such a sight? No doubt, much of what John saw was symbolic. But it couldn't have been easy to describe even that which was real. That's why the prophets often try to compare what they saw to something their readers can understand. John says that the appearance of the One who sat on the throne was like the gemstones,

jasper and sardine. Jasper is an aggregate of quartz and chalcedony and is usually red, yellow, brown, or green in color. The sardine gemstone is what we call today red carnelian. It is blood red in color. We can probably best understand John's words here as simply describing the blaze of color and light that he saw when he looked at the throne of God.

Justice Mingled With Mercy

John goes on to say, there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. Emeralds are green, while rainbows are multi-colored. But whatever John saw, the effect was awesome. Ezekiel also reported seeing a rainbow in connection with God's throne (Ezekiel 1:26-28).

We first encounter a rainbow in the Bible at the time of the flood (Genesis 9:11-17). The rainbow in the sky after the flood indicated that a just God had to destroy sin, but it also indicated that a merciful God would reach out to His people and that this world would never be destroyed by a flood again. The rainbow surrounding God's throne in heaven symbolizes this dual aspect of His character—mercy and justice.

The Twenty-Four Elders

John says, "Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads" (Revelation 4:4). Who are these twenty-four elders that sit around the throne? There are those who believe they are angels but the biblical evidence seems to point in another direction. They are wearing white robes. White robes are a symbol of the righteousness of Jesus (Revelation 7:14). Those who accept Him as their Savior are clothed in His robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10). So in my mind it is more likely that these twenty-four elders, clothed in white robes, are human beings who have been saved by accepting the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Is there anything in the Bible that would help explain how these persons have arrived in heaven to sit around God's throne?

Matthew tells us that when Jesus died several miraculous events took place.

Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many (Matthew 27:50-53).

When Jesus died the graves of certain “saints” were opened, and after His resurrection, these saints were raised to life. They came out of their graves and were witnesses in Jerusalem to the power of God. Did these resurrected persons remain on earth only to die again? Paul says in Ephesians, “When He [Jesus] ascended on high, He led captivity captive” (Ephesians 4:8). The Greek wording Paul uses here can more accurately be translated, “When He ascended on high, He led a multitude of captives.” Some modern translations of the Bible translate Paul’s words this way. For example, the New American Standard Bible says, “When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives.” The New International Version reads, “When He ascended on high, He took many captives.”

When He went back to heaven following His resurrection, Jesus took with Him those who had been raised to life at the time He came forth from the grave. These would have been persons from Old Testament times who had been faithful to Jesus. They formed an honor convoy to escort Jesus back to heaven in triumph. The twenty-four elders dressed in white robes that John saw sitting on thrones surrounding God’s throne in heaven were evidently from this select group who were redeemed from the earth at Jesus’ resurrection. They are representative of those who will be resurrected to eternal life in the general resurrection at the end of time.

When we look up into heaven with John and see the elders sitting around God’s throne, we can imagine what they must have experienced while on earth. They faced temptations. They dealt with discouragement and fear. They were lonely at times and had troubles and problems as we all do. But they faced all these things in the strength of their faith in the coming Messiah. They gave their lives over to God and let Him lead them.

Now they are sitting in heaven with Him. They praise the God who has redeemed them and taken them to be with Him in heaven.

The Four Living Creatures

John continues his description of what he saw when he looked through the open door into heaven's throne room.

Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle. The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (verses 6-8).

This is symbolic language. John sees four "living creatures" around God's throne; the first was like a lion, the second like a calf, the third like a man, and the fourth like an eagle. Ezekiel saw these same living creatures in vision as well (Ezekiel 1:10). Much of the symbolism in Revelation is drawn from the Old Testament. In fact, the book of Revelation quotes 444 verses from the Old Testament. Is it any wonder that so many people fail to understand this book? If we don't understand what God is telling us in the Old Testament, we'll not be able to understand the book of Revelation.

These "living creatures" full of eyes. Eyes are a symbol of understanding (Ephesians 1:18). We use a similar expression. Another name in the Bible for a prophet is a "seer." The prophet sees not with human eyes, but with the eye of spiritual understanding.

When the nation of Israel wandered in the wilderness the twelve tribes were organized by groups, each with its own banner (Numbers 1, 2). They camped according to their groups, under their own banner. They marched according to their groups, under their own banner. One banner had on it the figure of a lion; one bore the figure of a calf;

one the figure of a man; and one the figure of an eagle. Those banners were a symbol of divine guardianship or divine protection. They were a symbol of Jesus. The lion represents Jesus in all His power and kingly authority. The calf is a beast of burden; it represents Jesus' servanthood and sacrifice. The man represents Jesus in His humanity coming to earth. The eagle represents the Jesus who was resurrected from the dead and ascended to heaven.

The Oratorio of Creation

The twenty-four elders sing a song exalting the Creator who is worthy to receive glory and honor because He created all things. There are two oratorios in Revelation—one here in chapter 4 (the oratorio of creation) and one in chapter 5 (the oratorio of redemption).

You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for you created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created”
(Revelation 4:10, 11).

The central theme in the great controversy is worship. Revelation chapter 4 presents Christ as the One who is worthy to be worshipped because He created all things. In future studies we will discover how Satan attacked the very symbol of worship -The Sabbath.

Chapter 5 continues John's vision of heaven's throne room and the things that he saw happening there. It also sets up the series of the seven seals which will occupy our attention in chapters 6 and 8. There is a pattern emerging that runs throughout the book of Revelation. Several of the prophecies in this book are presented as a series of sevens. We have already studied the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. There are seven seals (chapters 6, 8), seven trumpets (chapters 8, 9, 11), and seven last plagues (chapter 16). The number seven in Scripture denotes completion or fullness. In Genesis, God creates the world in seven days. In Joshua, Jericho falls after the Israelites march around the city seven times—and make seven circuits on the seventh day. In 2 Kings, Elisha has Namaan dip himself in the Jordan River seven times in order to be cleansed of his leprosy. The number seven is a significant number in the Bible. The prophetic series of sevens in Revelation indicate the fullness or the completion of the things they are dealing with.

Revelation Chapter 5

In Revelation chapter 5, John continues describing what he saw as he looked through the open door into heaven's throne room :

I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look in it. So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. But one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals" (Revelation 5:1-5).

The scroll has seven seals, in the next few chapters the seven seals of history will be opened and eventually the powers of evil will be destroyed and Christ's eternal kingdom established.

Who Can Open the Scroll?

John hears an angel ask, "Who is worthy to break open the seals and read the scroll?"

In response to the angel's question, no one in all of *heaven* steps forward claiming the authority to open the book! No wonder John is distraught and begins to weep.

But there is One who can open the scroll. The Lion of the tribe of Judah- Jesus. As a human, He was born into the tribe of Judah. And remember in chapter 4 one of the living creatures representing Jesus was like a lion.

John continues,

I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had

been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne (Revelation 5:6, 7).

The Lion has become a Lamb! These are both symbols of Jesus. This symbolic Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes. Seven denotes fullness and completion. Horns represent power and authority. Eyes symbolize understanding and wisdom. This picture of Jesus as a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes is emphasizing the fullness of His power and wisdom. He has all the authority and wisdom needed to open the book.

A Slain Lamb in Heaven's Throne Room!

But there is something else John notices about this Lamb. The Lamb appears “as though it had been slain” (verse 6). There is a blood-soaked Lamb in heaven! And not just in heaven, but in the very throne room of God! Not only does Jesus have all power and wisdom, He has given His life to vanquish Satan and redeem His people.

That is a significant point. In the throne room, in the midst of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders that surround God's throne—stands a Lamb that is all bloody. That may seem strange, but it tells us that heaven never tires of honoring the sacrifice that Jesus made.

Revelation 13:8 speaks of Jesus as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” Jesus died on the cross in A.D.31. Why did John see a slain Lamb in heaven almost a hundred years after the crucifixion?

You see, Jesus is not simply the Lamb of God who died on the cross. What happened there on Calvary is a revelation to our dull senses of the pain that sin has brought to God's heart from its very inception. The cross, terrible as it was, was only a portion of the eternal pain that sin has caused God and the universe. Jesus is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. From the beginning He has faced the cross, knowing what sin would cost. Since the cross, He still feels the pain sin causes to His people and to His universe. When we see Jesus hanging on the cross, it is a microcosm of the pain that is resident in the universe due to sin. Jesus longs to come to put an end to sin and stop the suffering. It is not only this world that suffers due to sin, but also the whole universe.

The Oratorio of Redemption—First Stanza

Now when He [the Lamb] had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 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, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth” (Revelation 4:8-10).

Salvation is for all humanity—every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. No matter where you come from, no matter your background, no matter how far you have fallen in sin, the grace of Christ and the salvation He provided by His death is for you.

Notice that in their song, the living creatures and the elders praise the Lamb, because “You. . . have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth” (verse 10). Salvation has a double quality. Jesus redeems us on the cross from the penalty of sin, but he also redeems us from the power of sin. He not only redeems us from the guilt of the sin of the past, but he redeems us by transforming us so that our lives are different today. So not only are we saved from sin's penalty we are saved from sin's power. He redeems us and makes us kings and priests to God.

The Oratorio of Redemption—The Chorus

After the living creatures and the elders finished their stanza of the Oratorio of Redemption, John heard a great chorus swelling the refrain.

Then . . . I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and

wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!” And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying, “Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne; and to the Lamb, forever and ever!” (verses 11-13).

The Lamb Restores All That Is Lost Through Sin

This Oratorio of Redemption proclaims that the Lamb is worthy to receive seven things—power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing (verse 12). Interestingly, those are seven things that we lost through sin, and they are seven basic needs of the human heart.

Everything we lost through sin is restored to us in Jesus. Looking through the open door into heaven’s throne room in Revelation 5, we see Jesus at the center of a rapturous chorus of praise for the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world. And He is the only Being in heaven or earth who can open the seven seals on the scroll. Those seals will become the focus of chapter 7.