

The Throne Room of Creation

Revelation 4:1–11 — Part Two

Additional Reading: Isaiah 6:1–6; Ezekiel 1:4–28

Last week we stepped into the throne room of all creation through the eyes and ears of the apostle John. We began to see how and feel what he was seeing and experiencing as God called him from the natural into the supernatural realm. As John describes the throne he notes “one seated on it.” God is personal. He is not merely a force or power — He is God in three persons. Not only can God be known, he goes to lengths to make himself known. He is not distant. He has not created us and moved on about his business, as deists would say. He makes himself known in creation, and through the revelation of his Word. He has made himself plain in the incarnation of Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. And he is making himself known here in the throne room as the One who created all things for his glory, and sovereignly, perfectly rules and reigns over things. He is governing all things to the end he wills. He is not waiting to see how all of this is gonna turn out, like heretical Process Theology adherents have argued. He determines how this turns out, and brings it to pass. We saw the parallels to Mt. Sinai when God came down on the mountain and gave his eternal law through Moses — the flashes of lighting, rumblings, and peals of thunder that represent God’s power, his holiness and judgment of sin. All creation trembles in his presence. And then we saw the elders, dressed in white with golden crowns on their heads. Though we cannot say with certainty, I believe they represent the totality of the church as the 12 patriarchs and the 12 apostles. And we left off last week with the striking awareness that among those who approach God, they must be holy. Their white robes represent holiness, moral purity and righteousness, and the only source of holiness is God. Their robes are provided for them lest they be unclothed, naked, and unfit for service. And for us to enter God’s heaven and draw near, we must likewise be clothed in holiness. Since we have no inherent righteousness, but are deeply marked by sin, we must ourselves be clothed in his righteousness. And this he does for all who come to him in faith and repentance. Christ came to seek and save the lost. He died to save sinners. He does that by both paying the penalty of sin and providing righteousness.

That brings us to v. 5 — where we will see and be instructed by the inhabitants of heaven, those made righteous by Christ. In heaven worship is unending. God, may your name is hallowed today by your servants, and may we worship on earth as you are currently being worshiped in heaven. Let’s read **Revelation 4**, make some observations, then spend some time gazing at God and responding to him as John is doing, as the living creatures are doing, and as the elders are doing.

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Revelation 4 — ¹ After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” ² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³ And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, ⁶ and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

¹¹ “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.”

PRAY

So we jump in at the end of verse 5 as John tries to describe this panorama of worship.

v. 5b — before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God.

As with much that John describes, it is difficult to say with certainty what is meant by unusual descriptions and symbolism. Here we have the mixed image of torches are spirits. First, the number seven represents the perfection of God; it does not refer to seven separate spirits of God, which appears nowhere else in the scripture. I believe that this is a reference to the Holy Spirit. The light from the torches points to the illumination of the mind — the understanding of the things of God — that the Holy Spirit provides for believers to overcome their darkened minds. Understanding the seven torches as the Holy Spirit provides a clear trinitarian picture of God on the throne, perfect in power, in love, and purity as we sing in the hymn.

v. 6 — before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

3

The sea of glass is left somewhat of a mystery, but we are not left completely without direction. There are at least 3 things that can provide some insight into what the sea represents, and they are not mutually exclusive, so it may represent all 3 things, and more besides that I simply can't grasp.

1. The sea of glass serves as a reflector and magnifier of God's transcendent beauty and majesty. It adds to the awesome splendor of the throne room of God. Let's look at the brief description Ezekiel makes of this glassy sea.

Ezekiel 1:22 — Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads.

He describes it simply as awe-inspiring. We want to know what stuff does — especially men. Men tend to determine value or worthy by utility. “What good is a crystal sea, pastor? Can you fish in it?”

Here is the value of the crystal sea: It adds to the splendor of the throne room, heightening the senses and psyche to the glory of God. It produces awe.

This is an important truth for those of us who tend to view everything through a utilitarian lens. The sea of glass may not do anything in a traditional sense. But it shows eternal God's surpassing beauty and takes our breath away in the process. Let us bear in mind that value is not determined by what something produces. All that reflects God's beauty is of value.

- The Sea of Glass has value in that it reflects the value and worth of the creator.
- Human life, the crown of God's creation, has value on its own in that it reflects the image of God. This is not tied to what we do, or what we can do, but simply who we are: image bearers of God.
- All creation has value and worth in that reflects its creator and points us to our Creator. There is its value. It points to God; it is not to be worshiped as God.

Let's not miss beauty and art that reflects it. Industry is good and valuable. Work and industry can be acts of worship. But worship also involves beholding the beauty and majesty of God and his works.

The man's man, King David, captured this in **Psalm 27:4 — One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.**

If we feel our worship is dry, or passionless, could it be we need to think long and deep about the beauty of our Savior and what he has done?

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2. A second insight about the sea: it separates God from the rest of creation. It creates a barrier similar to a moat. God is holy. He is separate. As the barriers at the base of Mt. Sinai prohibit touching the holy throne, so the sea creates a separation. This may suggest God's apart-ness, his holy, holy, holiness.

3. The third implication of the sea may picture the overcoming peace of God. Recall the frequent storms on the Sea of Galilee when the Lord was engaged in his earthly ministry. Twice we saw God calm the sea and end the threat to human life. Here the Crystal sea is smooth as glass. There is no ripple, much less a threatening wave. The raging of the nations is over. All the turmoil of cosmic treason, all the brokenness and conflict of creation and circumstances are conquered and subdued by the Prince of Peace. All the storms of life are over.

What a hopeful comfort, believer, in the middle of the storms of life that come, to consider the awe-inspiring sea of glass and realize that what is now isn't the way it will always be. Whether or not the sea reflects God's overcoming peace, certainly the rest of Revelation, including the wiping away of every tear from our eyes, points us to the felicity of the eternal state for those in Christ. This is contrasted with the weeping and gnashing of teeth of those who remain outside of Christ.

Consider now the **living creatures** of vv. 6b-8.

They are described by their appearance, and what they do. If you are hoping I will provide a clear explanation of everything about them, I'm going to disappoint you. I will note that they appear to be the closest in proximity to the throne. Nothing escapes their notice. They may symbolize that the eyes of the Lord see everything and nothing escapes his sight. They don't represent the four Gospel as some people have grasped. There's no remote suggestion for that silliness. Some suggest these powerful angels guard the way to the throne as the angel at Eden guarded the entrance to the tree of life. I am less certain about these things, and only have a guess about the different appearances they have. It may be they represent the highest characteristics creation. The lion, the king of beasts, is thought to be the most noble. The ox is the strongest. Man is the most intelligent. And an eagle is the swiftest. This is speculation, but we can note somethings with certainty and hope. All of creation is fitted for the environment in which it serves. Fish have gills. We have lungs. These living creatures surround the throne and prompt all of heaven to worship. They have wings to soar above all else and make their voices heard. **Isaiah 6** gives us insight into a set of wings with which they cover their face so as not to see and be consumed by the glory of God's holiness. Again, for our encouragement,

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God has made us to worship and serve him, and has fitted us to do so. We are first clothed in Christ's righteousness. He has given us eyes to see his beauty and infinite worth. He has given us a voice, talents, resources, money, strength and energy... and the list could go on. All of these things fit us to worship and declare his glory in our environment as much as these four living creatures.

Beyond their description, let's see what they are doing:

v. 8b — day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”

They worship God, and their worship stirs up others to worship God. How do they do that?

- They use their voices! Again, they are equipped by God to do what God has assigned them to do. They are given voices, and they lift their voices.
- They use words that convey truth. They are not singing doowops, as fun as those may be. There is no sha-na-na-na-na, no fa-la-la-la-la. They declare truth with clarity! So it should be with us in our worship that we declare truth, clearly, with our voices, passionately, utilizing the art and skill of thoughtful prose and poetry, and music.
- Their worship is without end. The service does not end at noon, and after that Jason's deli. God's praise is unceasing because he is worthy of unceasing praise. How do we translate that to us? Everything we do is an act of worship, as Romans 12 points out. Every action, every expenditure of money, every word we speak, every vacation day, every work day, every sick day, every relationship... all these are acts of worship, or a disregard for worship. **“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.** The giving of our whole selves to God is how we worship.

Consider the truths their words express:

God is holy, holy, holy, and God is eternal. Those two things are eternally linked. The holy God on Mt. Sinai in Exodus is the same holy God in this throne room. He is sinless perfection. The New Testament doesn't herald a new policy on God's part that he is less holy or less concerned about holiness. He is unchanging in his holiness. He is unchanging in his wrath against sinners. And he is unchanging in his grace poured out through Jesus Christ. It is God's holiness that is inescapable, and it is God's holiness that will consume us, unless we have been forgiven through the blood of Christ's cross and declared holy through Christ's imputed righteousness.

6

I had a conversation this past week with someone who was becoming aware that there were certain behaviors he was doing that were indeed sinful and an offense against God. With an awareness that these things would not look good on his record with God, he described how he was sincerely trying to reform his behavior and curb or eliminate these sinful things. He was hopeful I would be pleased by his efforts. But I couldn't offer him any hope based on his efforts to reform his behavior. My response to him was this: If you are able to completely reform and control all your sin, all your immorality, none of that will do you any good on the Great Day when Christ sits in judgment. On that day, what we will not be able to escape is God's holiness. The elimination of all sin, were it even possible, will not produce or acquire positive holiness. It is God's holiness that permeates all the aspects of his character and all his attributes. He is holy, holy, holy, and there is none like him. As his holiness would have consumed those at base of Sinai had they breached the barricade, so his unchanging holiness will consume all sin. Our God is a consuming fire, and without holiness, no one will see God.

So the living creatures declare this inescapable truth for all time. God is glorified, and the inhabitants of heaven all stirred to stand in awe and worship this singularly holy God. If holiness marks any other aspect of creation, it is only because God has made it holy. So it is with believers in Christ. We are declared holy, and clothed in holiness through of Jesus Christ, not our own efforts, which are only regarded as filthy rags.

2 quick notes in conclusion:

The living creatures are declaring the attributes of God. The elders have a different song, but these creatures declare truth about who God is. One aspect of worship is declaring the truth of who God is. Finally, we see the outworking of the high passage praising the preeminent Christ in Colossians 1. These are supernatural, spiritual beings. There is a spiritual world that is presently invisible to our eyes, but it exists nonetheless. Colossians 1 talks about thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities. Here we see the reality of that presently invisible truth played out in the throne. God is on the throne, and all that he has made bows before him.

Now the elders:

Last week I made an argument for why I believe these represent the totality of the Church. Whether they do or not, there are still lessons we learn from them — but I do think they represent us. Let's see what they are doing in worship in vs. 10–11.

7

- They fall down. There is a physical aspect to worship. We stand at times in honor of God. We lift our hands. We get on our knees. Apparently these guys hit the deck face down. And that is exactly what we would do if the fullness of God's glory and presence were unleashed in this room. We would fall down as dead men. They don't die — those white robes of imputed righteousness, remember... But they will cannot remain seated before the King of the ages. Regardless of our cultural background, our emotions, or our pride, we are instructed here that our very bodies are to be used in worship. This honors God, and reminds us of who he is and who we are.
- They cast their crowns. These crowns are given by the King of kings. They did not come up with crowns on their own. Again, I made a case for this last week. Today the important thing to see, as we already alluded to in Romans 12, is that everything we have, everything we are, everything gift he has given us, is to turned around and used to glorify the Lord. We are not given gifts and resources for own glory, but for his. How is it with what he has given you? Are you using it to glorify God? Is your job, your art, your personality, your vocabulary... are you using these to worship God?
- They also use their words. "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." While the living creatures declared truth about who God is, **the elders declare what God has done.** In v. 11 they declare that God created all things — and then they use all the things they have to worship him. We will see when we get into chapter 5 that their song has more than one verse. They will go on to declare what God has done in salvation and how he did it. For now, let's just note the 2 different categories that the living creatures and the elders give us: Who God is — his attributes and character; and what God has done.

Both of these dimensions form and shape our corporate worship. Both of these need to form and shape our personal worship. Who is God? Are you captivated by his beauty in your personal time of worship? What has he done? What has he done for specifically in salvation?

As we close today I want us to consider in a very deliberate and concrete way what we know to be true about our God, and what we know to be true by observation and by experience.

[Refer to Prompt to Praise. Spend time responding to the prompts. Allow time for people to respond corporately in prayer.]

COMMUNION