

The Throne Room of Creation

Revelation 4:1–11 — Part One

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

When I was in 2nd and 3rd grade, I was riveted to our black and white television set as the age of technology began to mature and the Apollo space mission sent men to the moon for the first time ever. I remember the breathtaking, almost fearful wonder of seeing a rocket lift off the ground with that furious thrust and disappear out of sight of the cameras. Then, with six-year-old astonishment, I remember when the camera cut away from the empty sky to a highly secure room behind glass in Houston, Texas, called Mission Control. It was heady stuff for whole country, and it was really heady stuff for a little boy. Everything that happened to those astronauts who were no longer earth bound was governed by and under the command of Mission Control at the Space Center in Houston. My nose was almost touching the screen as I tried to see everything on the radar and computer screens that the scientists controlling the mission could see. I had no idea what I was looking at, but the boys would talk about it and with certainty describe the operation of every panel the next day at the playground. Today, as we return to Revelation after a seven-week hiatus we will be a little like that as we peer into the throne room of heaven where all of creation is governed and sustained — though we may not have the certitude of 2nd grade boys. Let's thank God for revealing these truths to us, and ask for help in understanding them. In an age when technology demystifies everything, let's be captivated by the vision of our holy God on his throne. I have several introductory statements to make that will help us understand what we are reading and seeing. We will get to the text, but be patient with me as we set the stage, if you will. Our approach this morning will be a little unusual, too, in that we will simply seek to unpack each thing John describes. There will be a number of connections to other texts made, and some glorious application points as we go.

The first 3 chapters, you recall, focused on the letters to the seven churches and had difficult messages from Jesus for each of them — demands for radical repentance for five of the seven. And for all of them some warning that tribulation and persecution were coming, even to the point of imprisonment and loss of life. But Jesus used this phrase with each of them: “The one who conquers,” or to the one who overcomes,” and then a promise of what he would reward them with as they stood firm. That promise of reward implied that there would ultimately be an end to the suffering and persecution, and that in the end, he would be the victor, as well as all those who are his.

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Jesus explicitly revealed himself as the Eternal One in chapter 1 — the one who is the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega, the judge, the ever-living one, the Almighty God. As John saw the glorified Lord in chapter 1, he fell at his feet as though dead. In chapter 4, John moves deeper into heaven, as it were, into the very throne room of the Great **I AM**, the holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty. We have 3 glimpses into throne room worship that are revealed in Scripture, and you may find them helpful reading on your own. Do you know where they are? Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1. The vision we have in Revelation 4 and 5 is the most detailed of the 3, but is still not exhaustive, because John did not have capacity to fully and exhaustively describe everything he saw. Why not?

John was earthy and natural. What he witnessed was spiritual and supernatural — **at once I was in the Spirit**, he says in v. 2. Revelation 4 and 5 reveal one significant worship service, if you will. (It's an unfortunate chapter break. Pay no attention to it.) But John is summoned to see the throne room of all eternity. He sees eternal God who has always been, is, and will always be. The finite cannot grasp or describe the infinite. It is simply impossible. So you will continue to notice, as we saw in chapter 1, John struggling to put earthly language to heavenly events. As he does through the book, he uses words that compare what is unknown to him to what is known. So we have, in v. 1, **a voice speaking like a trumpet**. In v. 3 the **appearance** of precious stones, and a rainbow with **the appearance of an emerald**. As we work our way through Revelation, we will see that not only do we find some of John's descriptions hard to grasp, we will find some of the imagery difficult to interpret. It's describing things that we haven't seen or experienced, and often things that are yet to take place.

What we will also see is that there is richness and sweetness in the whole of God's word. A number of things we will see in the throne room can be tethered back to other passages in the scripture — even as far back as the creation account in Genesis — and we see the culmination of those things in the eternal worship of our God. In some cases some seemingly obscure or difficult to understand items, or types, or clues, or commands in the Old Testament point to the complete, mature reality in Revelation. This reinforces for us the divine nature of Scripture, that God was the author, that he has preserved it, and that it is consistent and without error, even concerning things that sounded strange at the beginning. We can trust God's word, and we must thank him for it. Our faith should rise as we see the cohesiveness across hundreds and thousands of years, and different human authors at different times, writing in different places, and with different cultural backgrounds. And even though we may not yet have full understanding of everything in Revelation 4, what God reveals and

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illuminates, gives us needed understanding and helps us to trust that we will one day be able to testify to the absolute enduring truth and reliability of God's word, fixed forever in the heavens.

One other statement before we read the passage: What is taking place in heaven that is unfolded in Revelation 4 and 5 is the same reality we participate in *now* on earth. The Call to Worship in John 4 made that plain. Jesus said, in John 4:23, that the hour of true worship has now arrived. What marks true worship? It is worship in spirit and in truth. The Holy Spirit makes worshipers alive — they are born again from above, as John 3 says — so that they can worship God, who is Spirit, as spiritually living creatures. And they worship in truth — the truth of everything God has revealed about himself, and the truth of everything he has revealed about them. So while the scene, or the stage, may seem odd to us, it is our privilege and our reality to be able to join our voices spiritually with those around the throne of God this very morning and declare that he is holy, holy, holy, and worthy of all praise.

Alright, let's pray and read our text this morning. [PRAY]

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."

The Lord bless to us the reading of his word.

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In v. 1 John is summoned to the throne room of all creation by Jesus himself, the first voice he hears. Right off the bat we begin to note the transcendent authority of King Jesus. Authority and sovereignty are two major themes to note as we go. Watch for them. In this verse, he has authority to command John's presence in heaven — impressive enough to command him on earth, but now he is translated to heaven. So we see authority over the natural and the supernatural.

The phrase, "like a trumpet" gives an old choral director like me insight into his authority. Brass instruments are loud in general, but a trumpet has the acoustic ability to cut through and overblow everything else. Next time you go to the hear Erika play in the symphony, count the string players. Then note there are only two or three trumpets. A choral director knows that one trumpet can overplay 80 to 100 singers without really trying. So the reference to a trumpet says to me that his voice and command overrides everything else, and it does so with commanding clarity.

Jesus says he will show John what must take place "after this." After what? After the tribulation and persecution they will endure. This is a major reason for the book of Revelation: It is to show that Jesus is the Victor. After Satan and a rebellious world throw everything they have against the King and his people, the King has the last word, and his people are with him, worshiping. The dominion of darkness is defeated. The King reigns forever.

The most crucial aspect of the throne room is the phrase that ends v. 2. The throne room doesn't merely have a throne, but the throne is occupied — there is one seated on it. The Lord reigns! He is seated, ruling over all his creation well. This is center of all creation. Mission Control doesn't compare with the throne room. Mission Control hoped they could bring astronauts home. God rules and reigns, sustaining all things by the word of his power, bringing whatsoever he will to pass. There is no uncertainty, no fretting, no threats. The Lord reigns; let all the earth rejoice!

v. 3 first describes Almighty with comparisons to precious jewels helping us understand God's priceless worth. God is not described in human terms, but by the outworking of his glory and majesty. He is supremely valuable. Further, around his throne was a rainbow. Here is an allusion back to another place in the scripture where God's character is put on display. What does a presence of a rainbow bring to mind? Genesis 9. God is faithful. He is a covenant keeping God. What he says, he does. He is unchanging. Psalms 104:2 tells us God covers himself with light as a garment. A rainbow

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is a projection of light symbolizing purity. **1 John 1:5** says, God is light; in him is no darkness at all. Light is a symbol of purity, goodness, holiness. God is faithful, and God is holy.

To sum up, these things point to authority flowing from both his omnipotence — his absolute power — and his holiness — moral purity. John's use of simile reveals that the King is beyond description in earthly language. His appearance is beyond human language to describe, and his authority is beyond creation's capacity to defy. He is King. The throne of all creation is occupied by the Creator, and he rules securely with no threats to the throne.

Next John focuses at the area around God's throne. There are twenty-four lesser thrones with twenty-four elders seated on them. First we ask, who are these 24 elders? We can't say with certainty because the text doesn't speak with certainty. One possibility is that they represent the Aaronic priests who were responsible for leading worship in the Old Testament. 1 Chronicles 24:4 describes 24 orders of priests. That's a reasonable possibility, but I don't think it's the best fit. Another option is that they are angelic captains of worship. They are high ranking angels superintending worship. I think that's an even weaker fit. I think the 24 are the 12 patriarchs of the Old Testament, and the 12 apostles on this side of the cross in the New Testament. As such, they represent the totality of the church. They represent all of God's people from all time.

Here's why I come to that conclusion. The 24 thrones around the ultimate throne seems to hearken to promises that the saints will reign with King Jesus.

- **2 Timothy 2:11–12a** — the saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him...
- To the church at Thyatira in **Revelation 2:26–27** — ²⁶ The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.
- Jesus referring to his disciples in **Matthew 19:28**, says, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.
- Further, in **1 Corinthians 6:2** we are told Christians will judge the world — which is the prerogative of those who are reigning.

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- I also note they have white robes and golden crowns. Their white robes, I think, picture being clothed in the righteousness of Christ. They have been fitted to be in heaven through the work of another. Their crowns are rewards and honors given to them by King. Such crowns are promised to saints as rewards: a crown of righteousness, a crown of life, an unfading crown.

We return to these guys at the end of the chapter and see what they do with all they have been given.

v. 5 turns our focus back toward to the throne of God. When you the language of flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder, you need to think with a Jewish mind and go where? Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19, when God gave his sin-exposing law to Moses. Look at the language there quickly.

Exodus 19:16–18 — On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

The lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder show the **power** and **judgment** of God. It shows his judgment in that he does not tolerate sin, but his holiness consumes sinners who draw near. As an act of grace, God had Moses and the leaders erect barricades around Mt. Sinai so they wouldn't be consumed by his holiness. God is unapproachable in the flesh, which is why the robes on the elder are of significance. God's infinite power shook the mountain, and shook the foundations of heaven as Isaiah described it in Isaiah 6. People of God, behold your God. In the tribulation that is coming, what will sustain you? A better question: Who will sustain you? God is our refuge and strength. The Lord of Hosts is with us! Don't fear Caesar, or even all the powers of Hell. God drowned Pharoah's army in the Red Sea, and all the power God exerted when he did that is infinitely less than the power he has. Creation trembles and vibrates at his power. He sets up kings and brings them down. Do not fear what is to come. Keep your eyes on the King.

This is a good place to draw the line this morning and provides us an opportunity to focus on the Gospel of grace. If God does not, and cannot tolerate sin — if sinners who approach this holy God are consumed, how is it that the elders were not killed? We go back to their white robes. White is a symbol of righteousness. We do not, by nature, have any righteousness of our own. Romans 3:10

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underscores the truth of our condition: There is none righteousness; no not one. Isaiah 64:6 says that even our attempts at righteousness are filthy rags. Filthy rags... that is our wardrobe. That's what's in our closet. And it betrays the true condition of our hearts and our spiritual bankruptcy. Unless we can borrow some righteousness from someone, or have our filthy rags of unrighteousness covered. And that is exactly the Gospel.

Where did those 24 elders get their white garments? Did they work hard and gain merit and produce righteousness that would counter make them fire-proof against God's holiness? Have you read the lives of the patriarchs? They didn't come up with their own righteousness. They were as bankrupt as you and I are. And the apostles... perhaps they earned their own robes: Paul, a murderer. Peter, a denier. No, they needed a borrowed righteousness to gain entrance into God's kingdom as much as anyone else, because there is only one righteous, and that is the perfect Son of God. He humbled himself and came to live a sinless, perfectly righteous life to pay sin's death penalty and provide his righteousness to those who turn to him in faith in repentance. Those elders are sitting there in clothes that they did not earn, and yet they live and worship and are not consumed!

As they sit there clothed in the righteousness of Christ, the same offer is made to everyone who will turn from their sin and self-effort to Christ, believing that he is the Savior, the Lord. If you will believe on the Lord Jesus you will be saved. He will forgive your sin and clothe you in his righteousness — and you will live and worship and not be consumed. But be warned, all will appear before this very throne where power, and judgment, and holiness are pouring out from the one who occupies it. If you have not received his forgiveness and righteousness, you will perish before him. Today is the day of salvation. The warning is also an invitation. It is not to condemn you, but to give you life that the Lord reveals the truths we have seen this morning. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart, but to Christ and live forever. Worship this worthy King.

PRAY

GOSPEL THREAD