

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

CHAPTERS 4 & 5

The book of Revelation is written in a cycle of recapitulation. Outcomes of troubles and persecutions are first revealed, then specific scenes are repeated to give additional information to help explain how and why a certain result was reached. To best understand this book, one should not try to read it linking successive chapters chronologically, but rather remember that the fantastic imagery helps one recall previous visions in order to provide deeper understanding and insight. There have been many attempts to divide John's revelation into smaller sections based on different themes, but it is clear that there are at least two main sections found in the book. Chapter **one** through **eleven** present basic principles of the moral and spiritual conflict between God and His forces of righteousness versus Satan's forces of evil. We see an assurance to the faithful that God is firmly in control and will provide all the help we need to conquer evil and seize our victory over Satan and sin. God will defeat the enemies of righteousness by executing judgments upon the world. Christ is clearly the One who controls the destiny of the world. He has full authority to carry out the plan of God revealed in the book sealed with the seven seals. When this book is opened, it summarizes God's dealings with the inhabitants of the earth. The seventh seal, which contains the seven trumpets, details God's dealing with men in calling them to repentance.

By the end of chapter eleven, we have already met the main characters of the Revelation and are assured of the outcome and victory over sin and death. Several questions still remain, however, such as the real reason for the world's hostility toward the church – Satan. In chapter **twelve** through **twenty**, we see a deeper examination of the content of the little book which John received and ate (in chapter 10:9-11), when he is told that he must prophesy again. The little book holds even more information regarding the judgment upon men. A brief summary was given regarding the book in chapter eleven, but in the next nine chapters we will receive a full explanation of how this judgment is reached and unfolds. We see the full evil of the Roman Empire, imperial-backed paganism, and worldliness brought into focus. By the end of this section, we finally see the great magnitude of the conflict between God and Satan, and its inevitable conclusion.

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In our study, we have already been introduced to the Son of Man (Jesus) in chapter one, seen in His full power and directly overseeing the lampstands/ churches. Chapters 2 and 3 invite us to witness a thorough and candid spiritual examination of the specific 7 churches to which the following visions of the letter will apply. God the Father and Christ are actively preparing the church for the trials and persecutions they will shortly face. Since these churches are the first ones privileged to see God in His dealings with Satan and evil in the remaining chapters, chapters 2 and 3 are in reality a highlight of the book, not a sidelight (as some Premillennialists believe). Though it seems that wicked and evil men often rule the world, all people and all things are firmly under God's control, and He is fully able to prepare His children and keep them from trials and temptations.

There is a change of scenery in Chapters 4 and 5 allow us special access to heaven and see the throne of God. We see the great majesty of our Lord and His attending angels, and understand the great power and control He continually exerts over all of creation. There is a vision of great peace and joy and perfect order, not the disorder, confusion, suffering, death, and sorrow as experienced in the world. In chapter 4, we see the central figure of God as Creator. In chapter 5, we see the central figure of Christ as Redeemer. We are awed by God's power in chapter 4 and awed by His love and mercy in chapter 5. In chapter 4, Jesus says "believe in God", and in chapter 5 says "believe also in Me". In chapter 4, we learn that the throne that rules the universe is God's throne in heaven, not Caesar's in Rome. In chapter 5, we have confirmation that Jesus, the co-ruler of the universe, sacrificed all for His love of the saints. Both chapters confirm that worship, glory and honor should only be given to the Father and Lamb who once was dead but now alive...never to any arrogant and evil earthly ruler. Everything is under God's control and continues to work to the church's benefit. It is altogether fitting to first show these reassuring scenes in chapters 4 and 5 to remind the churches that God still reigns and has already conquered evil and death through the redemption provided by the Lamb of God.

CHAPTER 4:

The first and overriding vision presented to John is the throne of God, signifying His infinite power, rule, and dominion over all creation (1 Kings 22:19).

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God is presented as a “jasper stone” (clear as crystal – 21:11), signifying His glory but especially His perfect holiness and righteousness. God is also described as a “sardius” (carnelian, a red stone), the blazing red appearance signifying His justice in divine judgments avenging wickedness (He is described as ‘a consuming fire’ in Heb. 12:29). The emerald rainbow around the throne would suggest the mercy and hope of God (remember the promise of the rainbow, Gen. 9:12-17). In Exodus 24:10, when Moses, Aaron, and the seventy elders “ate with God”, we also remember the pavement of sapphire “as clear as glass” beneath Him, again suggesting His holiness and mercy (this is mentioned again in Ezek. 10:1)

Many other remarkable sights are present. Around the large throne of God we see 24 lesser thrones, each seating one of 24 elders who are clothed in white garments (the heavenly color of holiness) and crowned with golden crowns (*stephanos*, the crown of victory). The number 24 (12 is the complete number of organized religion) suggests a combination of the twelve patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel (the Jewish faithful) and also the twelve apostles (the Christian faithful), thus combining the redeemed of both covenants now united in Christ. We also see flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, showing the power and majesty of God (reminiscent of God at Sinai, Exodus 19:16). There are seven lamps of burning fire, signifying the seven Spirits (or seven-fold Spirit) of God, which illuminate the truth (John 16:13). We see a “sea of glass” before the throne, reminiscent of the molten or brazen sea before the Holy Place, in the southeastern corner of the inner temple court. This likely represents God in His transcendence, separated from His people by His majesty. Later in chapter 21:1, the sea is gone. John is seeing at this time events before the final judgment, but events after chapter 20:11-15 describes the heavenly scene once this world has passed and all saints are at home with God and “...we shall be like Him.” (1 John 3:2).

We next see the “four living creature, full of eyes in front and behind.” They are thus able to see everything, in all directions, keeping constant watch on God’s creation. The actual description of these creatures is difficult to discern. Whether they are similar and have different faces, or different features of the animal forms they portray, or some combination, it is hard to say. Clearly, though, they convey the likeness of a lion, a calf or young bull, a man, and an eagle. We immediately

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see a similar appearance and function to the seraphim mentioned in Isaiah 6:1-3. We also see great similarities to descriptions of the cherubim (of Gen. 3:24, Ezek. 1:5-21 and 10:1-22; two cherubim also sat at either end of the top of the ark of the covenant, shielding the mercy seat with their wings). Many have conjectured about the meaning of their appearances. One speculation is that they represent what is noblest/ bravest, strongest, wisest, and fastest in the realm of living creatures. Perhaps they simply represent the four basic divisions of life on land: wild beasts, domestic animals, birds/ flying creatures, and man. If comparisons to the seraphim and cherubim are accurate, then they may be special angels of God or a special order of heavenly beings closest to the throne and who serve God's will directly and continually. Their function around the throne would seem to be to maintain constant watch over creation and continually sing God's praises.

These creatures never rest. They continually sing a hymn of praise before God, causing the 24 elders to prostrate themselves before the Father in worship, casting their crowns before Him. This symbolizes their homage and reverence, recognizing God's power and majesty, as well as their complete dependence on Him for their redemption and victory over sin and death. Twice it is mentioned that God lives forever and ever, in contrast to the false gods of Rome and the heathen populations, as well as evil rulers who would attempt to usurp the throne of the Almighty. We remember Isaiah 44:6 ("I am the first, and I am the last; and besides me there is no God..."), as well as chapter 1:8 of the Revelation. Those closest to God in heaven see His true nature and are immediately drawn to praise and honor Him.

As the chapter ends in verse 11, we see the 24 elders sing their song of praise. It is clear that only God merits such honor and reverence and allegiance. Any who would give similar honor to an idol or to the emperor is not worthy to sing God's praise, and any who would truly praise God could never betray Him by so honoring anyone on earth. As we now have the complete picture of God's sovereignty and control, the stage is set for the remainder of the events to unfold.

CHAPTER 5:

The scene in heaven in chapter 5 now changes to a focus on our savior, Jesus Christ, the redeeming Lamb. We see a book (scroll) being held in the

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Almighty's right hand. It is covered on both front and back (full and complete, nothing to be added) and sealed with seven seals (perfectly and thoroughly protected against any who would falsely claim to know its contents). It thus contains the absolute will of God and His complete revelation to His saints. As we will later see, the contents are revealed symbolically in great visions as each seal is broken. Clearly God's purposes and designs are beyond the knowledge and grasp of mankind, unless God deems to purposely reveal His plans. Gradual revelation of these visions serve the purpose of strengthening and encouraging all who would sooner or later suffer persecution and trials, especially the seven churches.

A strong angel suddenly asks, with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the book and break its seals?" There is obviously no response from any in heaven or on the earth, as not one is worthy. Although John is heartbroken at this dilemma, he does not realize that this is a rhetorical question. The only One worthy is identified in three ways: the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:9-10; Heb. 7:14), the Root of David (or Jesse: II Sam. 7:11-14; Isa. 11:1 & 10), and the Lamb (John 1:29). The first name, from Gen. 49, was always recognized as a messianic prophecy. The Root of David acknowledges that Jesus was both the offspring of David but also his progenitor, present and participating in creation and providing salvation for the righteous of all time, even David. The Lamb recognizes the righteous Christ who humbled and sacrificed Himself by dying on a cross to remove all sin. Although John might have expected to see a vision of a powerful lion, he instead sees the contradiction of a humble lamb that had been slain but now lives. The sacrificial and redemptive power of Jesus has achieved the ultimate victory over sin and death. The scroll is able to be opened now, not by power or force, but by the sacrifice and love of the Lamb. The Lamb is seen in the center of the throne area, next to the Father. He is the center of creation and has first place among all living creatures, the creation, the elders, and the living creatures. All things in heaven and earth are summed up in Christ (Eph. 1:9-10). The Father and the Son will share the throne together (Rev. 22:1-3).

We see the slain but living Lamb as having *seven* horns (complete power, authority, and strength - **omnipotence**; Deut. 33:17) and *seven* eyes (complete vision with full and perfect knowledge - **omniscience** (II Chron. 16:9; Zech. 3:9 and

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4:10; Col. 2:2-3). The *seven* Spirits (or seven-fold Spirit, or fullness of the Spirit) are part of the Lamb and show Jesus' **omnipresence** – the Holy Spirit sent out through the apostles to revealing His truth and power through the gospel (John 15:26 and 16:13). We therefore see all three of the Godhead present at the throne: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit – all of like mind and purpose.

Having all authority, the Lamb is able to take the book from the right hand of God. He is now ready to take the plans of God and, through the Holy Spirit, reveal the truth of the book and its prophecies. It is His rightful place to break the seals, and successive visions of the contents of the scroll are revealed as each seal is opened. The four living creatures and the 24 elders now fall down before the Lamb in praise. They each have a harp (symbolizing praise) and golden bowls of incense, which liken to the incense of the tabernacle and temple (Ex. 30:7-8 and 34-38; II Chron. 13:11; Psalm 141:2), which signified the pleasing aroma of the prayers of saints (see also II Cor. 2:14-16). The four creature and 24 elders now sing a new song. The song is new because it now speaks not only of God's power and love, but also about man's spiritual redemption, made possible by the Lamb. This is similar to the ode of Psalm 98:1-2: "Oh sing unto the Lord a new song, for He has done marvelous things." We have been purchased by Jesus for God's own purposes and saved from death (I Cor. 6:20 and 7:23; II Peter 2:1). This salvation is for all of every nation, and for all time (Dan. 7:13-14; Mark 16:15; Acts 17:26-27). Further, we see that all the saints have been made priests in God's kingdom (see also I Peter 2:5 & 9). There is no longer a need for a physical intercessor to approach God on our behalf, for we are God's children and may directly go to His throne for help (Heb. 4:16). Verse 10 ends with a promise that we will reign upon the earth in God's kingdom. This is not speaking about a spiritual kingdom yet to come on the physical earth, as premillennialists might say. The one and only kingdom has arrived (Luke 17:21; Col. 1:13-14; Rev. 1:6; Rev. 5:10), and we are already members of this eternal kingdom. We are currently reigning with Christ in His kingdom – victory is *now*, not just our final reward in heaven.

The next vision shows us countless angels surrounding the throne and living creatures and elders. The figure, "myriads and myriads, and thousands and thousands" really suggests an uncountable and incomprehensible number, similar to references in Dan.7:10 and Heb. 12:22. The entirety of heaven is singing

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overwhelming praises to God and Jesus. The Son of God is worthy to receive (and thus had *already* received) all **power** (I Cor. 1:24), all **riches** (II Cor. 8:9; Eph. 3:8), all **wisdom** (I Cor. 1:24; Col. 2:3), all **strength** (Eph. 6:10; Luke 11:22), all **honor** (Heb. 2:9; Phil 2:11), all **glory** (John 1:14), and all **blessing** (Mark 11:9-10; Rom. 15:29). This sevenfold praise shows the completeness of Jesus' victory and glory.

To show the completeness of the Father's and the Son's perfect power and glory, in verse 13 we finally see all of creation, both living creatures and inanimate things, joining in with the angels in their song of praise. We remember Psalm 148, a similar song of absolute praise to God, who reigns supreme in heaven. Whether mankind chooses to acknowledge it or not, the entire creation has willingly and unquestionably done God's bidding since the beginning of creation.