

Revelation 4-5 What is Heaven Like?

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Do you ever wonder what Heaven is like? What do you picture when you think of it? Maybe you have that classic image from the movies of Saint Peter sitting in a big desk outside a gate in a massive wall checking off who gets in. And that gate is probably floating on clouds just like another famous image we have of heaven with babies floating around with white wings. Friends, that is nothing like what we're about to see as the apostle John takes us up into Heaven and describes a visit to God's throne where it's actually very loud and bright and strange and hard to put into words. You'll see what I mean as we read.

Revelation 4:1 After these things 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."

Now, before we can talk about what he saw, we have to deal with how he got there. If you remember, back in Chapter One, Jesus told John:

Revelation 1:19 Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.

Those are the three main divisions of the book of Revelation – that's the outline.

- The things you have seen – that's the vision John had seen in Chapter One,
- The things which are – that's the letters to the seven churches,
- The things which will take place after this – this is what we're about to get into and stretches all the way to the end of the book.

First, we'll see what Heaven is like in Chapters 4 and 5 and then chapters 6-19 describe what is commonly referred to as the Great Tribulation. It's a time when God pours out His wrath on the earth. But before that occurs, we believe there will be an event called the rapture. We believe the rapture could happen at any time, and it's when God suddenly pulls all the living Christians off the earth in preparation for His judgment. Paul says when it happens it will be very much like what John just experienced.

In 1 Thessalonians, he writes:

1 Thes 4:16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

In both cases, in Revelation with John and in what Paul says in Thessalonians, we have a voice like a trumpet calling Christians up to be with God in Heaven.

Now, I know that can sound a little odd – we don't have anything to compare it to. After all, it's unprecedented in human history. We can't say, 'Oh yeah, it's like that rapture back in '97. You know, they say it may hit us here in DC this time...' No. It's never happened before and therefore it sounds strange. But I bet the idea of a flood sounded strange to people in Noah's day. I bet the idea of the sea parting sounded strange in Moses's day. And I bet the idea of a Resurrection from the dead sounded strange in Jesus' day. There are a lot of things that God has done, and will do, that sound strange before they happen.

But notice the Bible says the doctrine of the rapture isn't intended to be perplexing, it's supposed to be comforting.

God wants us to be thinking of Heaven, He wants us to be hoping for an escape from this miserable world where men in black masks are massacring other human beings in barbaric fashion and then posting it on YouTube for the entire world to see.

Friend, if the stuff going on in this world makes your heart ache, it's because this world is not your home. CS Lewis used to say, 'if I find in myself a desire for something that cannot be satisfied by anything in this world, then it must be that I was made for something other than this world.'

And isn't that true? Why do you get so upset about the state of affairs today? Why are you bothered about what's going on in your life or on the news? Isn't it because you have this deep, deep, sense that 'this isn't right!'

Friends, it's not right. This is not the way God designed the world to be. This is not exactly the life He intended you to have – He wants you to know that. He wants you to know that you were created for more! You were created for goodness, justice, righteousness, beauty, love, creation, exploration, construction – you were created for good, but everything has gone wrong through sin. Our world, our lives, and our souls are infected by it, and until we're completely delivered from it, life is always going to have seasons of hurt and pain.

But God has given us a blessed hope – a hope that we can be forgiven for the sins we have committed, and delivered from the affects of sin in others.

We find that forgiveness in Christ and then we wait out our days until we are completely united with Him in His home - the home in Heaven that John is about to show us. Are you ready?

Revelation 4:2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne. 3 And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and *there was* a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.

Now, today jasper is a red stone, but most scholars agree that back in the first century it referred to a white stone, perhaps what we call diamonds today and the sardius stone was, and is, explosively red. So, you have this brilliant, vibrant, bursting display of red and white and it's set against a backdrop of emerald green which actually makes the bright colors stand out even more. And then,

4 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.

Now, the crowns they wear are not the crowns of royalty. This is the victor's crown – you've seen them depicted in ancient art, small crowns woven out of leaves, or in some cases gold formed into the shape of leaves. They were given to people who have been victorious in competition or war. It's a crown used for decoration and recognition, not the crown used for royalty – they're two different words for two different kinds of crown in Greek.

Which leads us to assume these elders are most likely representatives of the church. They have received the things Jesus promised to those who overcome back in chapters two and three. Do you remember? He promised He would clothe them in white garments, and they would sit with Him on His fathers throne. And speaking of the throne:

5 And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices.

That reminds you Old Testament scholars of something, doesn't it? After God delivered the nation of Israel from Egypt, they were all gathered at Mount Sinai where He gave them the Ten Commandments,

Exodus 20:18 Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood afar off.

God is the same today as He has been in the past, and that shouldn't surprise us. We should expect to see themes reappearing throughout history. And here's another one:

(Rev 4:5 cont.) Seven lamps of fire *were* burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

We've seen this 'seven Spirits of God,' before, back in Revelation Chapter One. And if you remember, we said it's a picture of the Holy Spirit. The number seven almost always signifies completion and fullness and God is frequently pictured as fire – He appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and as a pillar of flame to guide the Israelites on the Exodus.

But, there's something else going on here too. Seven lamps burning before the throne of God, where else have you seen seven lamps burning? In the tabernacle of course, and then

later, in the temple, burning on what we call a menorah! And didn't God tell Moses to build the tabernacle based on the model of what existed in Heaven?

So here's John sees in Heaven so far: a beautiful mix of glimmering white and opulent red with deep emerald green, and twenty four elders sitting on lesser thrones dressed in white and wearing crowns. Sparks are flying, as lighting cracks, the ground is shaking as thunder rolls, voices are calling out, and fires are burning, and then:

6 Before the throne *there was a sea of glass, like crystal.*

Have you ever seen the fireworks over the mall on the Fourth of July? That's kind of what this reminds me of. You have all this crackling red and white brilliance lighting up the sky, and it's reflecting off the Potomac and the pool at the Lincoln monument. And while all of that is going on, the US Army Band is playing the 1812 Overture, and they bring out their cannons and fire them off while the fireworks are going on and it's just overwhelming! How do you take it all in – everything you see, and hear, and feel?

I think that gives us just the tiniest taste of what John saw. He's being overwhelmed by everything and he struggles to put it into words, so he falls back on poetic imagery. John uses the word, 'like' 54 times in Revelation: He who sat on the throne was *like* a jasper and a sardius stone; before the throne was something *like* crystal.

Human language can't fully communicate what he saw; it was really one of the things where – you just have to be there. Even if he had his phone with him and tried to snap a selfie, it wouldn't have worked – you couldn't find the right filter to make it look like what you really saw and felt, and... you ain't seen nothin' yet!

(vs 6 continued) *And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. 7 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. 8 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!”*

They're worshipping God! And notice that worship is contagious. Their worship provokes the elders to worship:

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

11 “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.”

Now, can you picture any of this? An explosive throne, shocking colors, beasts and elders and worship. I mean, is your imagination awake? It’s amazing isn’t it? But John’s experience lines up with what others have said in the Scriptures about Heaven:

Isaiah 6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His *robe* filled the temple. 2 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one cried to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy *is* the LORD of hosts;
The whole earth *is* full of His glory!”

4 And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

5 So I said:

“Woe *is* me, for I am undone!
Because I *am* a man of unclean lips,
And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King,
The LORD of hosts.”

Ezekiel 1:26 “... [I saw in heaven] the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone; on the likeness of the throne *was* a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it. 27 Also from the appearance of His waist and upward I saw, as it were, the color of amber with the appearance of fire all around within it; and from the appearance of His waist and downward I saw, as it were, the appearance of fire with brightness all around. 28 Like the appearance of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day, so *was* the appearance of the brightness all around it. This *was* the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.

So when I saw *it*, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking.

Paul said - **2 Cor 12: 3** And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

No one gives us a perfect picture of what they see, but they all agree, Heaven is overwhelmingly beautiful and awe-inspiring, and it quickly puts you in your place.

Isaiah says, “Woe is me!”

Ezekiel fell on his face.

Paul said it’s not lawful to repeat what I heard.

And we’ll see John have similar experiences several times during his tour of Heaven.

Long before anyone spent *90 Minutes in Heaven* or encouraged us that *Heaven Is For Real* God was sending us **divinely** inspired accounts of what Heaven is really like, and there’s even more to know.

Rev 5:1 And 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. 2 Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?”

3 And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it.

4 So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. 5 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.”

6 And 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. 7 Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.

Now, what is this all about? What is this scroll in God’s hand?

The most likely answer is: it’s the title deed to the earth. God created the world and everything in it and then he gave man dominion over the earth – but Satan came along and tempted man and in the process he took over our rightful dominion. The Bible says that Satan is now the prince of this age, and that he has power on the earth.

After Jesus’ baptism He went out into the desert where Satan tempted Him and one of those temptations was that Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of this world and he told Jesus, all of this is mine, “**for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish**” (Luke 4:6). And he told Jesus that if He would worship Satan, Satan would give it all to Him.

Jesus’ response was interesting, He said, “**Get behind me Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God and Him only shall you serve.’**” But notice, He didn’t say, “You’re nuts! You don’t have that authority. What are you talking about?”

Jesus acknowledged Satan had some authority on earth, but He stripped Satan of that authority three years later when He went to the cross as the perfect sacrifice for our sins, and that is why He appears here as the lamb that has been slain. You see, by the power of His blood being shed, He purchased salvation for men and redemption for the world.

This is why *only* He is able to take the scroll and repossess God's creation. No one else was *worthy* – not the 'strong angel,' not John, not the beasts around the throne, not Moses or Abraham, or anyone else. It's not a matter of who is *willing* to take the scroll. The question is: who is *worthy*? And the answer is, only One: the perfect lamb of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Savior, the beginning of the Creation of God and the author of it's redemption.

And now that it is properly back in His hand, Heaven erupts in worship again:

8 Now when He 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. 9 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,
10 And have made us kings and priests to our God;
And we shall reign on the earth."

11 Then I looked, and 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, 12 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!"

13 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!"

14 Then the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever.

So, that's Heaven's throne room – and not winged baby in sight, right? But what do we see? We see God and we see Him being worshipped. Revelation is a book of worship. It says a

lot about what will happen on earth, yes. But that's only because of what is happening in Heaven. Jesus Christ, the son of God, came to earth to take it and us back from Satan – to provide us a way of redemption, and the hope of a future without pain, suffering, sorrow, or death. And He is being relentlessly praised for it.

One big part of what makes Heaven, Heaven, is the fact that God is in His proper place – on the throne, and we are in our proper place – worshipping Him. Worship is central.

We may ask the question, what is the chief end of man? What were we created for? And the answer is: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Friends, let me ask, do we enjoy God? Do we worship Him? Do we see Him, or think of Him, in the ways described here? Is there any living color, any explosive power, any awe and wonder in our lives when we focus on God?

For too many of us, the answer is no. We hunger for it, we want it. But we don't really experience it because the things of this earth too often block our vision of heaven. Many of us are exhausted when we come in here on Sunday morning. This is our one chance each week to make a big deal about God corporately, to put Him first, but all the other stuff going on in our lives presses on us and conspires against it.

Friends, I want to say something hard to you right now, but it's something we all need to hear. This room is too empty at 10:30. Our services start at 10:30. We open with prayer and worship - they're a vital part of what we do as a congregation and you're missing it. You're missing it because you were up too late last night, or you got up too late this morning, or because you tried to do one more thing this morning before you left the house, or because you stopped and fellowshiped with a friend out in the hall – but meanwhile, your only chance each week to worship God with your brothers and sisters in Christ, in this church, is passing by. You're missing out on something, something that is a vital part of heaven, something you will be doing for all of eternity and I want to encourage you to make a greater priority of it.

Now, I have been single, I've been newly married, and I have been a parent. I was once critical of people who couldn't make it to church on time, I thought to myself, "you can make it to work on time each morning, why can't you make it to church?"

And then, I became a dad, and I went from being light infantry to heavy armor – I went from having no logistical footprint and being able to go anywhere on a moment's notice to needing at least 48 hours advance warning, two bags, one stroller, and a baby carrier to go anywhere. I know the frustration of finally getting the kids all ready to get out the door on time and then realizing, "You don't have shoes on! Where are your shoes!?!?" Or smelling that awful smell that lets you know you're not going anywhere until you go back to their room and change that diaper.

I've been there, I've done that, and I wholly repent of my earlier attitude. I understand, you try to get here on time, and life conspires against you. But still, may I encourage us all – we

miss something important when we miss worship. It's not just the opening act – worship will go on and on in Heaven, but there won't be a pulpit and preacher.

I want you to soberly consider – is there anything else you can do to be here in time for worship? I'm only challenging you on it because I love you and I think you're missing out on something that would do you good. So please, think about it – how can you make it to worship practice on time – here is where we're learning to do something we'll soon be doing forever, and when you show up in Heaven you don't want to look like the newbie who's trying to figure what's going on.

We're going to join our voices in worship again this morning, in just a minute, but first I need to point out one last thing, and it's something even more serious.

John saw all of this because a door was opened to Him and He was taken up to Heaven. Friend, from where we sit on earth we are on the wrong side of that door. So, we have to ask the question, how do we get in?

And the answer of course, is through Christ. Jesus opened the door for John, in fact, in John's gospel, Jesus tells us He is the door. He is also the Way, the truth, and the life, and no man comes to Father except through Him.

Let me ask: will Jesus open the door for you? The answer is either yes, or no. It's yes if you come to Him, ask for forgiveness of your sins and surrender your life to Him. Tell Him you want in, you want to be with Him, you don't want to be left on your own in this life and ask Him to help you see Him at work in your life today – not in the crazy ways John saw, not yet at least, but you can still see and know God at work in your life if you're watching for Him, listening to Him and worshipping Him.

If you've surrendered to Him before you can do that right now by praying a simple prayer like this: