

The Triumphant Church

Revelation 4:1-11

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I'm only going to read Revelation 4:1 now.

John said, "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven." That's our focus—"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.'"

If you are a true child of God, heaven is your home. The Bible tells us that we are strangers in this world, and pilgrims, and that heaven is our "Father's house." Remember that Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." That "place" is called the "Father's house."

So that's my home; this world is not my home. I'm a stranger and a pilgrim just passing through.

Paul says in Philippians 3:20-21, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body..."—our "bodies of humiliation"—"...that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself."

I believe that in Philippians 3 here, Paul is describing the rapture of the church. Our spirits are looking from heaven, which is our home, for the rapture, when we come with the Lord, who will change our bodies "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." That's the blessed hope of the believer.

I believe that it is also pictured in Revelation 4:1. It is a picture of when the church will be "caught up" to heaven, because John the Apostle hears a voice which says, "Come up here." A door is opened in heaven, and John is caught up to heaven and he hears a voice which says, "I will show you things which must take place after this." The phrase "after this" or "hereafter," at the beginning and the ending of verse 1, is the Greek phrase "meta tauta."

Now remember in chapter 1, verse 19, that John was given the key to the main divisions of the book of Revelation. There John was told, first, "Write the things which you have seen." That's Revelation 1, the vision of Christ that John saw on the island of Patmos. Secondly, John was told to write "the things which are." That's chapters 2-3, the voice of Christ to the seven churches. Thirdly, our section now in chapter 4, John was told to write "the things which will take place after this," or "meta tauta."

We have now come to that third division, in as much as chapter 4 opens with that phrase "meta tauta" or "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet..."—1 Thessalonians 4:16 tells us "the trumpet of

God”—“...speaking with me, saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this.’” Here’s our word “meta tauta” again.

So verse 1 takes place after the church age, or the dispensation of grace. The church was born on the day of Pentecost and will be raptured up “to meet the Lord in the air.” God’s plan and purpose for the church on earth will be over. So we’ll be caught up to heaven, we’re going to have crowns in heaven, which indicates that we’ll have our rewards for service, and we’ll be around the throne of God.

So after the church age, we have this prelude, in chapters 4 and 5, to the time when the wrath of God is poured out on planet earth.

We see now that the church is caught up into heaven. In Revelation 4:1, we will find out what John saw and heard in heaven. There are two sections, from verses 2-11. The first is the throne in heaven, verses 2-8, and the second is the theme of heaven, verses 9-11.

We’ll look, first of all, at the throne in heaven. The word “throne” is given in this chapter 11 times. If you also count the thrones that the elders are sitting on, it would be 13 times in 11 verses or 47 times in the book of Revelation. So Revelation is about the throne and the throne room. So John gets caught up to heaven, and he sees the throne in heaven. The book of Revelation makes it clear that God is sovereign and ruling and reigning in the universe.

As much as I know about the Bible and as long as I’ve walked with the Lord, as I look now on our nation, it’s easy to have a troubled heart. It’s easy to be filled with anxiety and fear. So I have to pull back and remind myself—and I was encouraged by this chapter—that God sits upon the throne. That means that God is sovereign, ruler and King over the entire universe. God is in control.

I’m glad; aren’t you? We can fret, fear and worry about this and that, but I’m so glad that it’s not who’s in the White House but who’s on the throne in heaven that matters. God is ruling from the throne in heaven.

So John sees this throne. In Psalm 103:19, it says, “The Lord has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all.” That’s such a blessing.

Now John saw four things when he saw the throne in heaven. We’ll note them and then go back and break them down. In verse 2, you have the phrase “on the throne.” In verse 4, you have the phrase “around the throne” or “around about the throne.” In verse 5, you have the phrase “from the throne” or “out of the throne.” And in verse 6, you have the phrase “before the throne.”

First of all, in verses 2-3, what did John see “on the throne”? It says, “immediately.” Isn’t it interesting that the Scriptures on the rapture say that it will happen “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” John says, “Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne.” The statement, “One sat on the throne,” is in the present

tense, which means He is continually sitting on the throne, so it will not be vacated. Verse 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.”

When John says, in verse 2, that he “was in the Spirit,” we’re not sure exactly in what sense he is speaking. I think it’s best to say that this was just a spiritual experience. We’re not sure he is referring to his spirit; that he left his body and went to heaven, which is possible, or whether he’s saying that the Holy Spirit caught him up to heaven, which is also possible. Paul had that experience. He might also have meant that he was in the Holy Spirit, on the island of Patmos, and this was a spiritual experience he had in this vision of being caught up into heaven. In any case, it was a work of the Holy Spirit.

The first thing John saw was a throne. It was set permanently in heaven, and there was “One [who] sat on the throne.” Now I want to give you some additional information to support what I believe these Scriptures mean. I believe that John sees God the Father on the throne. The entire focus in chapter 4 is God the Father, who is the sovereign ruler and creator of the universe. The focus in chapter 5 is God the Son, who is the redeemer who saved us by His blood. So it is my conviction—and I may be wrong—that verse 2 is referring to God the Father on the throne.

We always kind of wonder that if there are three Persons in the Godhead, are there three thrones? Which one will we see? What will it look like? There are a lot of questions that we don’t have answers to in the Bible. But when you get to heaven, and God’s on the throne, you won’t have any more questions. You’ll be on your face saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” You’ll be amazed.

These passages are so hard to do exposition on. How do you, in human language, describe the glory and splendor of God on the throne in heaven? John, even under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, could only convey to us what he saw by comparing it to what we are familiar with. The exposition kind of lessens the splendor. This is one of those chapters in the Bible where you want to read it and just bow your head and say, “God, you are awesome!” What a picture this is!

We’ve also been given a picture of heaven by Daniel, by Ezekiel and by Paul the Apostle. I can’t say anything; the descriptions are too amazing for words. But John gives us some amazing insight as he is caught up to the heavenly realm.

So I believe that John sees, first, God the Father sitting on the throne. Next, you’ll see the phrase “like” or “like as” or “like unto.” John is using symbolism to describe God. He is like three stones: “a jasper and a sardius stone” and “an emerald.”

The jasper was the first stone on the breastplate of the high priest. A jasper is a clear stone like a diamond. The closest thing to a jasper is a diamond. If “a diamond is a girl’s best friend,” ladies, you’ll love heaven; they’ll be all over the place. When you look at God, it will be like

seeing a diamond in His glory. My guess is that this jasper speaks of His glory, His majesty and His purity. It could convey the holiness of God.

Then John saw a sardius stone, which was ruby red. A ruby red stone would speak of the redemption. Because of that, some feel that this is picturing Christ on the throne. They argue that the first stone was the symbol for Ruben, which means “a son is born.” The sardius stone is the last stone on the high priest's breast, and represents the tribe of Benjamin, which means “son of my right hand.” So they theorize that this is an indication it refers to the Son of God.

But I think that the Jews would understand the stones and their symbolism and that it speaks of redemption.

The third stone is the green emerald. This is not a stone; it was a rainbow. And it probably wasn't just an arch of a rainbow but an entire circle rainbow around the throne of God, which was emerald green. So “there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.”

So you have the diamond color of jasper, the sardius stone that was ruby red and the emerald green rainbow. No doubt the rainbow is a reminder of God's promises and God's faithfulness. Whenever you see a rainbow in the sky, it's conveying a promise of God: the faithfulness of God. And green is the color of eternal life; that God promised us eternal life.

Heaven is going to be beautiful. Years ago, I made a couple of trips to Moscow. One trip was during the demise of communism in Russia. All the buildings, except for Moscow's Red Square, were just a drab, concrete gray; there was no color. I had never been to a city that big that looked so drab and dull. I thought, What a sad place to live.

But when we get to heaven, it will be brilliant and beautiful, and there will be a lot of stimulation for the eyes and ears. It will be glorious! When we get to heaven, we're not going to say, “Is this it? Is this what I've been waiting for? Just a concrete apartment?” Jesus had 2,000 years to prepare a place for you; it's gonna' be awesome! When the Bible says that we can't see, hear or understand the things that are in heaven, it's because they're indescribable. Paul said they were indescribable.

The second picture is that of what is “around the throne.” Verse 4 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...”—or “stephanos”—“...of gold on their heads.” I believe these 24 elders around the throne of God are representative of the church. Another theory is that they represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles, equaling 24.

But the number 24 is representative. In the Old Testament, there were so many priests that they couldn't all do their service in the temple at once. So they put all the priests in groups, and there were 24 of them. So when the priest went to the temple to do his service, he represented all of the priests in his group. This is found in 1 Chronicles 24.

So I believe that this number represents the church. The true believers of Revelation 2 and 3 are caught up into the heavenly scene. We will see these 24 elders again in Revelation.

Another theory about these 24 elders is that these are actually angels or angelic beings. I don't believe that is so, and I'll give you four reasons why. We never see angels on thrones; these elders sit on thrones. We never see angels with crowns; these elders have crowns, which indicates they have been given their rewards. We never see that angels are called "elders." Even in the New Testament church, an elder is one who represents the ministry of the church. These elders sang a song in chapter 5, verses 9-10 of redemption; angels are never redeemed. Satan was an angel and he fell. Other angels fell with him and became demons. They will not be saved or redeemed. Only humans can be redeemed. So whatever the identify of these 24 elders, I don't believe they are angelic beings. I believe they are humans, and they represent the church that is caught up to heaven.

The word "crowns" that they wear is not the word "diadem." That kind of crown is for kings. The crowns the 24 elders wear are called "stephanos." They are victor's crowns. If you ran in the Greek Olympics and you won the race, you would get a laurel wreath put on your head. It was called a "stephanos" or a victor's crown. This crown would eventually wither. But the crown the elders wore was an eternal crown.

The elders' crowns represented something important that I think is consistent with the idea that this is the church. When we get caught up "to meet the Lord in the air," the first thing that is going to happen is what's called "the bema" or "the reward seat of Christ." We won't be judged for our sins—that was taken care of at the Cross—but we will be rewarded for our service. You can have a saved soul but a wasted life. Every one of us are called to serve the Lord; maybe not in full-time ministry or to be a missionary or an evangelist, but we are all called to serve the Lord in some capacity. We are all servants of the Lord. God gives us a sphere of ministry and service, and we need to do it faithfully "as unto the Lord" and "for the glory of the Lord" and for the good of others.

And when we get to heaven, God is going to reward us. We're going to hear, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your Lord." So I believe that these 24 crowns indicate the rewards to the church for their faithful service done on earth. You don't want to get to heaven and be the only one not wearing a crown. I want a crown. I want to serve and bless the Lord. And no one is going to be strutting around saying, "My crown's bigger than yours!" At the end of the chapter, you'll see that we take our crowns off and throw them at His feet, because to God be all the glory, honor and praise. He saved us by His grace, He used us by His grace and "to God be the glory; great things He has done." We'll throw our crowns around the throne at the glassy sea.

So I believe this is the church caught up to heaven, in verse 4. It is the church victorious, the church triumphant in heaven.

Now notice, thirdly, in verse 5, we see out "from the throne." "And from the throne proceeded

lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning..."—this would remind the Jews of the lampstand in the temple—"...before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God." Most Bible scholars concur that this is an indication that God's wrath will proceed from the throne.

God's throne is called the throne of grace, but we must remember that God will also judge sin. Chapters 4 and 5 are a prelude to chapter 6, when the wrath of God will be poured out on a Christ-rejecting world. The mighty men of earth will say, "Hide us from the face of Him who sits upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!" That's what these lightnings and thunderings are: the wrath of God.

Years ago I was also in Austria at the Calvary Chapel base in Milstatt, Austria teaching at the Bible college. I have never, ever heard thunder like I heard there. The power of that thunder! It was the loudest I've ever heard in my life in that valley with the mountains surrounding it. I think that from the throne of God the thunder and lightning and the power of God will be awesome! When Moses got the Ten Commandments on the mountain, there was lightning and thundering, and the Law condemns and brings death. So I think that this is also the judgment of God's throne.

You say, "Well, I believe in a God of love. I believe in a God of mercy. I don't think God would judge the wicked." He must judge the wicked, because He is a holy and righteous God.

The story of Noah in the Old Testament is a real story. It really happened; it's historic. Noah built a big, honkin' boat. It was about the size of a football field. It had many levels. God told Noah, his wife and his family to get in the boat, and then God shut the door. There was only one door. Jesus is the only way to safety. Then the rains came down and the floods came up. God actually judged and destroyed the wickedness of man. It had become so great that God destroyed all flesh on planet earth. God did it once; God will do it twice. There comes an end to God's patience when He will and must judge sin.

You talk about a world of justice! People are crying for justice today. God is the just judge. He will bring His judgment. So the lightning and thunder and the power of the Spirit is a Scripture indicating the judgment of God.

Fourthly, we see, in verses 6-8, "before the throne." "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..." or "beings." I think "beings" is preferred, because we have angels or angelic beings in the category of cherubim and seraphim. Verse 6 continues, "...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!'" That speaks of the eternal nature of God.

I believe that these “living creatures” are angels. Angels are fascinating beings, created by God. They are not eternal; only God is eternal. At what time in eternity past did God create angels? The Bible is silent on that, so we don’t know. My guess is that it was pre-Genesis 1:1. I believe that when God created the heavens and the earth, the angels were there singing at God’s magnificent creation. I believe these angels are in a certain class of angels known as cherubim or seraphim. They are powerful, beautiful and intelligent. When we get to heaven, not only will we see God on the throne, but we will see angels. They’re not going to be little, fat babies in diapers shooting arrows, little cupid angels. They’ll be glorious and beautiful.

Satan was created by God as a cherub angel. He was an anointed cherub, and some suggest that he was the most beautiful of God’s angelic beings. But it was pride that started in the heart of Lucifer, which means “son of the morning” or “son of light.” Thus he was thrown out of heaven. He took other angels with him; one-third of the angelic host left heaven in rebellion with the devil. They are what we know as “demons.” So Lucifer tried, in pride, to usurp himself above God, got kicked out of heaven and other angels rebelled with him.

You say, “That’s really scary, Pastor John! There are demons all over the place!” He only took one-third; there are two-thirds on our side. There are good angels, committed to God’s bidding, who will protect us and watch over us.

And angels must be glorious to look upon. As you look at the description of these angels, they’re amazing. One angel looked like “a lion,” another looked like “a calf,” the other had “a face like a man” and the fourth one looked like “a flying eagle....each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night.” They actually sing and worship and declare, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”

There is a lot of speculation about these angelic beings. I don’t know that we can be sure what it implies that they looked like a lion, a calf, a man and an eagle. We just know that God creatively designed them that way. It’s also interesting that these angels—a lion, a calf, a man and an eagle—are pictured in the four Gospels, which present the life of Christ. Matthew’s Gospel says, “Behold your King”; He’s the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Mark says, “Behold your Servant”; the image of a servant is that of a calf or an oxen. Luke says, “Behold the Man”; here we have the face of a man. And John’s Gospel says, “Behold your God.”; we have the image of the eagle soaring unto the heavens. Whether or not this is intended, I don’t know, but it’s cool to see the parallel here. But when we get to heaven, the throne will have all these angelic beings.

Now unless God spiritually opens your eyes, you don’t see angels now. They could be in the room right now flying around, but you can’t see them or detect them. They are God’s hidden servants. But when we get to heaven, we’ll see the angels all around the throne.

Notice what they sang: “Holy, holy, holy.” Why three times? Because the holiness of God is the chief or central or paramount attribute of God. If God is not holy, then God is not God. He has no sin, no unrighteousness, no “shadow of turning,” which speaks of immutability—He doesn’t

change. God is perfectly righteous, and He is without sin or any blemish; He is a holy God.

In Isaiah 6, when he saw the Lord on the throne in heaven, he also saw the cherubim and seraphim and their wings. They also were singing “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts.”

You never read in the Bible where the angels sing, “Gracious, gracious, gracious,” “merciful, merciful, merciful” or “loving, loving, loving.” Now God is gracious, merciful and loving, but His grace, His mercy and His love is holy. His holiness tints all of His attributes. Even God’s wrath is a holy wrath. God does everything in perfect holiness and in perfect righteousness.

The fact that “holy” is repeated three times could be because God is triune. They’re praising the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The triune God is holy.

Then God is described as “Lord God Almighty” and that He is eternal. He’s not only omnipotent, but He’s also eternal. He “was and is and is to come!” What a glorious scene around the throne!

Now I want to move to the second and last section, verses 9-11. It is the theme of heaven. So John is caught up to heaven, he sees who is on the throne, he sees before the throne, from the throne and around the throne. Now he sees the throng around the throne and the theme and what they sing in heaven. “Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever...” So these angels are giving “glory and honor and thanks” to the Father on the throne.

What follows is, I believe, a picture of the church in heaven, the whole redeemed saints of God. It could be the Old Testament saints, as well. “The twenty-four elders fall down before Him...”—pay attention; when you get to heaven you need to know the protocol—“...who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ‘You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power...’—why?—“...for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.”

These are the words to the song we’re going to sing in heaven. “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power, because You created everything and for Your pleasure!” We were created for the pleasure of God.

I think it’s marvelous that the 24 elders fall down. One of the Hebrew words for worship in the Old Testament literally means “to prostrate, to bow down” or “to bend down.” When we get to heaven, we’re all going to be bowing down in humility; it’s a humble worship toward the throne, knowing that we have been saved by the grace of God.

The word “worship,” in verse 10, means “to ascribe worth.” Our Anglo-Saxon word “worship” means “worthship” or to ascribe to God worth. So they are worshipping God, giving to Him worth, what He is worthy of. Then as the elders are worshipping, they take their crowns and cast them before the throne as they sing.

When we get to heaven, we're going to cast our rewards back at the feet of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We're going to give Him thanks and praise for all that He has done.

The song they sing is in verse 11: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power..."—why?—"...for You created all things..."—and why did God create all things?—"...and by Your will they exist and were created." This is the first song, or doxology, in the book of Revelation. Chapter 5 will have another one. So we learn that God is the sovereign ruler of the universe, and that He created all things for His pleasure.

If you're not living a life that pleases God, you're not living a life of purpose. God created you in His image and likeness. God made you; you are unique. God made you for His pleasure and for His glory. So the purposeful life is a life that brings glory to God. It brings pleasure to God. If you're living out of His will and living in rebellion toward God, you're not pleasing God. You're not fulfilling the purpose for which you were created.

I like the emphasis in the book of Revelation: God's sovereignty and creative power. The theory of evolution is one of the most damning things that has ever come on the scene. It damns many souls to hell for all eternity, because if we evolved by accident, there is no need for a God who created us with purpose. There is no meaning to life.

Is it any wonder that people are freaking out in our culture today? We've been teaching them for generations that we are accidents, that there is no God, that there is no life after death. We've been teaching materialism. We've rebelled against the idea of God. There is nothing more important for you to realize than the fact that God "created all things." And God, by right of creation, can do whatever He wants.

I think of a puny, little man, a creature, shaking his fist at creator God. What folly! God can do whatever He wants, by right of creation. He is the sovereign King of all the universe. He's the one on the throne; not you. God is holy and righteous. The emerald green rainbow around about the throne shows He is faithful, He is sovereign and He is creator.

God made you and He wants to redeem you. We'll see that in chapter 5. We'll sing the song, with the saints, around the throne. God redeemed us, by His blood, "out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation." The glory goes to Jesus.

Are you living for His pleasure? Or for your pleasure? Either God is on the throne of your heart, or He is outside of your life. Are you living for His glory and His pleasure? Or for your glory and your pleasure?