

Revelation 4:1-6a

The throne in heaven

(*The People's Bible*, Revelation, pages 61-66)

Look

Jesus told John to enter heaven through an open door. There he would see visions of what lay ahead.

Chapter 4 begins with the second major portion of the book. Most all of Scripture and the first three chapters of Revelation view earth from the eternal perspective -- which is difficult for Christians and impossible for unbelievers to understand. Now we view heaven and eternity from the heavenly perspective. Since heaven and eternity are entirely outside of our experience at this time, these things viewed from the unfamiliar heavenly perspective are even more difficult to understand.

No longer do we see Jesus Christ as the Suffering Servant, the Humble Savior; difficult as these are to understand. Now we see Christ who, in the same kind of glory we shall have through Him, is undisputed ruler of the universe, to whom even every atom of the creation bows in wonder and awe and who commands the power to cause the universe to cease to exist in the twinkling of an eye -- and can bring it back even more quickly. Since John must use the words of earth with their references to time and space in speaking of heaven where there is no time and space (it is *eternal*) we must be very careful in understanding the "*intended sense*" of each passage.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the prelude and introduction to the rest of the book. We may call these two chapters "**Reel 1**" of history, in order to better understand their relationship to the rest of the book. The word "reel" is used here with reference to the old film reels. Each reel views different events with a unique focus and for a particular purpose. Reel 1 takes place in Heaven before the throne of the Lamb who initiates the great final conflict with the forces of evil. The outcome, because He was already victorious at Calvary, is the final triumph of the Lamb, while Satan is confined to the lake of fire. Reels 2 through 7 can (and will be) diagramed on a historical time line because they present, from the heavenly perspective, events that take place in earthly history between the time of the writing of the book of Revelation until the final return of Christ.

Outline of Revelation 4 - 5

Chapters 4-5: Reel One

- A. 4:1-5: The players
- B. 4:6-11: The setting
- C. 5:1-7: Who shall open the Book?
- D. 5:8-14: Worship of the Lamb

Verse 1 "**Take place after this**" -- from the Sunday after this vision into the future. By the end of the book of Revelation it is clear that these events John is about to see from heaven's perspective will take place between the Sunday on which this vision took place and the end of this creation.

Verse 2 "**In the Spirit.**" -- John speaks not of a trance but he was "**in spirit**" (closer to the original Greek) in heaven. John was not physically in heaven, but in spirit in heaven. Much like the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12: 2-4.)

"**A throne standing in heaven . . .**" God in the seat of His glory. If you ask "*How does God who is a Spirit sit on a throne?*" then remember that when someone asked Luther what God was doing before Creation, Luther answered, "He was creating switches to use on people who ask foolish questions." The Old Testament regularly features the image of God ruling from His throne.

Verse 3 "**One . . . was like a Jasper**" - Probably a diamond; **carnelian**, a dark red brilliant gem; **a rainbow like an emerald**, in plainer language: a brilliant deep green halo. Here we see God, who is the light that illuminates heaven (Rev. 21:23) in all his Glory. We are reminded in the diamond

of the brilliant hues it gives off. The carnelian with its deep red reminds us of majesty and judgment. Green is the color of comfort presenting us with grace, hope and peace. Green is also the color of life. We must remember that this is an attempt to make human words carry descriptions which defy human experience and senses. God dwells in unapproachable light and is One "Whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:16).

Verse 4 **"24 thrones . . . 24 elders"** - Human beings who worship God (4:10). 12 is the number of the Old Testament Church (12 tribes) and 12 is the number of the New Testament Church (12 Apostles). Some commentators also see in the number 24 the 24 courses of priests in I Chronicles 24:3-19, in which case we are talking again about the ministry of the Word in both the Old and New Testament. In either case we have represented here elders of the Church from both Old and New Testament times, representing the entire body of believers throughout the history of the world.

"Clothed in White Garments" -- again white means holiness, available to humans only through the work of Christ - ours through grace by faith. But they have more than this holiness of Christ's; by faith they have "golden crowns" - the crown of victory. The victory here is their victory over sin, death, and their flesh - which in Christ, they overcame (2:17, 3:5, 3:21). And so they were rewarded with authority and glory (2:26). Here then, we have people such as ourselves, who have been leaders in Christ's Kingdom from the very beginning of the world, in proclaiming the Word, and in the process overcoming the world, the devil and their own flesh through the exercise of their faith.

Verse 6 **"And before the throne & as it were, a sea of glass like crystal."** John is here comparing what was on the approach to the throne to shiny, smooth crystal, when he says "**as it were**" which means "very much like." Some commentators add that in the surroundings of judgment here is a representation of the peace we have with God through the forgiveness of sins, purity, glory and joy which those who rely on Christ will know even in God's awesome presence. It is not unfitting to see the comfort of the Gospel in this way.
Chapter 4 begins the second section of Revelation and contains the first in a series of visions that continue through the vision of the new Jerusalem. John sees God's throne, which is where the future is determined and guided. Many visions and symbols that we meet in this chapter will be repeated throughout the book.

Discuss

1. Does Revelation describe events that might happen or events that will happen?
2. When would these events begin to happen?
3. Read Ezekiel 1:26-28. Both Ezekiel and Revelation begin with a vision of God's throne. What is the significance of God's throne, and why does it form a fitting way to begin a revelation of the future?

4. Read Zechariah 4:2-10. What insights do we get from this section about the meaning of the lamps burning before the throne?
5. Who are the 24 elders? (Hint: Note the number of tribes of Israel and the number of apostles.)

Apply

6. Why is it comforting for us that the visions of Revelation begin with the vision of God's throne?

The revelation began at God's throne. God is in control of all things.

Revelation 4:6b-11

The living creatures and the elders praise the Lord

(The People's Bible, Revelation, pages 66-68)

Look

This chapter continues to flesh out the vision of heaven. We are introduced to the four living creatures, who will be active throughout the book. Then we listen as all the heavenly creatures praise God.

Verse 6b - 8a -- **the Sphinx of Revelation** -- Over twenty different interpretations have been offered to explain what this creature represents, not to mention the interpretation that says that this is a flying saucer! On passages like this it seems everyone tries to find his own pet ideas represented. Interpreting passages in this way is not fair to the text. Of such passages Luther wrote in the last years of his life, "Many have tried their hands at it, but until this very day they have attained no certainty. Some have even brewed it into many stupid things out of their own heads." (In his "Preface to the Revelation of St. John," 1546.)

A step--by--step interpretation of this passage:

1. Is it figurative or literal? Only the text itself can tell us this. The text (v.6) says that they were (literally) "**in the middle of the throne and encircling the throne.**" We have already discussed the problem of time and space in heaven. To take this literally would leave us with either all these creatures piled on top of God on his throne -- which is silly or with a vision of God and these spiritual creatures all mixed together in a sort of indefinite mass. Therefore we must conclude that we have figurative language.
2. If this is figurative language, what is the point of comparison? What are known Biblical points which we can compare to points here? The number four is biblically associated with the earth itself (Rev. 7:1, 20:8) and therefore represented here is an attribute of God (all things flow from him) which deals with earth. "**Full of eyes in front and behind**" signifies omniscience, and God's care for his people. It is through the eyes that facts are established and righteous judgment maintained according to Scripture. In a vision Ezekiel also saw four living creatures, each of which had four faces (Ezekiel 1:4--10) -- **human, lion, ox and eagle**. Perhaps the simplest and most generally encompassing conclusion we can draw here is that we have an image of God's providence as it guides earthly history. This does not mean that there is no special office of creatures which John describes here that God has created for the purpose of executing his providence.

While more detailed explanations of the descriptions of these creatures symbolically represented here vary greatly, we will stick with those features which are here described and elsewhere explained in Scripture. We appear to have here a visual representation of qualities that are invisible on earth, and may be noticed only with the discernment of faith, if noticed here at all. Earth history from heaven's viewpoint is presented in reels two through seven in the same way. The qualities of those events from the viewpoint of eternity the event's spiritual ramifications -- are presented. Like this "sphinx," these events look very different from our earthly viewpoint than they do from the view in heaven.

Verse 4:8a -- **"Six wings"** is explained in Isaiah 6:2. Two wings to cover the face in reverence, two to cover the feet in modesty, and two for flying. Again, while the language is that of symbols, the reality of these special creatures seems to be assumed. Their physical appearance is the symbol.

Verse 4:8b -- **"Holy, Holy, Holy"** -- 3 holies: one for each Person of the Trinity. He is Holy and he makes us holy by faith in Jesus Christ.

"Lord God Almighty" -- 3 again, there can be no question that the only true God is to be identified as the Trinity. This is a very basic fact of God Himself, Who and what He is. The first 3 verses of Genesis already teach the Trinity. Hence all religions which teach only about "God" but refuse to acknowledge the Trinity of the Father who created us, the Son who redeemed us, and the Holy Ghost who sanctifies us (**Holy, Holy, Holy**) are false. This is the basis of our opposition any group which talks about God but refuses to acknowledge Him as the Trinity with the heavenly hosts and all the men of faith of all ages. (See Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; Numbers 6:24--26).

- He is the Lord in that He alone is the ruler of the universe.
- He is God in that He alone is worthy of all worship.
- He is Almighty in that He can do all things and will do all that He says He will.

Verse 4:10 -- **"lay their crowns before the throne"** -- they lay their crowns of victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil at the feet of God -- taking no credit for themselves, but giving all credit to God. This is the ultimate worship that we strive for even here on earth.

Discuss

1. We learn about the four living creatures from the book of Ezekiel. There they are active in the history of God's Old Testament church. Look up the following passages, and state what light they shed on the interpretation of the living creatures in Revelation.

- Ezekiel 1:5-12,18

- Ezekiel 10:11-15

- Ezekiel 10:20-22

Apply

2. Why do the elders and cherubs praise the Lord? The next time you attend worship, think of how these powerful men and beings praised the Lord, and let their example spur you on to meditate and sing praises to the Lord.

We are introduced to the cherubs, mighty angels who do the Lord's will. We hear them praise the Lord. He alone deserves our worship.