

Chapter 4

Although the revelation of Jesus is an apt title for the book of Revelation as we are conducting in our sermon series – this chapter changes the focus from Jesus and the church to God the Father and the throne. In some ways, I am sure this is meant to prepare us for the things that are to come throughout the book of Revelation as a reminder that God is on His throne and that He is in complete control. There may be plagues and pestilence and persecution to come but this chapter serves as a stark reassurance that God is sovereignly in control and that nothing in history, in the future, or in the book of Revelation happens outside the permissive will of our Heavenly Father. Although this book is primarily the revelation of Jesus, in this scene we see Jesus telling John to come up and look in heaven where the Father is seated on His throne in the midst of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. The Son and the Father and the Spirit are not in competition with one another and there is no conflict in the person or the work of the Trinity. The creeds of the church aptly begin with the Father as the first article followed by the Son's redemption and the Spirit's sanctification. Jesus himself acknowledges that the Father is greater than He is (John 14:28) and yet they are co-equal and co-eternal. And so, we see Jesus telling John to get a look at the greatness of the Father before He begins to show Him the devastations and the destructions that are yet to come.

God the Father and the throne are by far the main emphasis of this chapter as the word throne itself is mentioned 14 times in these 11 verses. God's awesome and fearful presence is characterized by flashes of lightning and claps of thunder as well as the unapproachable light that is described as emanating from His presence. He is surrounded by color and brilliance that is somewhat indescribable to the human experience with hews of light and rainbows surrounding His presence. There is a sea of glass that separates His holy throne from all else and seven torches of fire that burn before Him continually representing the Spirit of God. God's throne is infrequently talked about in Scripture, but when we are introduced to it, we see the magnitude and glory of God displayed in incredible ways. (Daniel 7:9-11; Isaiah 6:1-6; Ezekiel 1:26-28) The transcendence of God cannot be explained or described and that is why it is called transcendent. "That is what the Scriptures mean when they say, 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.'" (1 Corinthians 2:9)

V.1-2 Immediately after we see Jesus describing Himself as one standing at the door knocking at the end of Chapter 3, we see John indicating that in this new encounter that he sees an open door. Seemingly, saying that those who open the door in which Jesus is knocking on will some day be a spectator and participant around the throne of heaven. We see that this new encounter that John is describing is the same voice and the same Son of Man speaking to him from Chapter 1 and we begin to understand the significance of Jesus bringing us to the throne of God. This is the second time that we see John say "I was in the Spirit" in the book and we see a new encounter begin here. This encounter begins a tremendous amount of information that is provided to John all the way through his next encounter in Revelation 17:3. Now we have no way of knowing if all of chapters 4-16 are provided in this same encounter, but we are at least led to believe in the possibility of it since there are no other indications of intermittent encounters with the Son of Man, heaven, or other angels in this same sense. Finally, Jesus' invitation to John to "come up here" is an applicable invitation to all His followers as we seek to separate ourselves from the things of this earth and seek first His kingdom.

These first couple of verses in chapter 4 are also important because there are many in the church who believe that it is at this point that the church is raptured before the tribulation begins. As we have talked about throughout this study it is much more important for us to be in unity about the essentials of who Jesus is, what Jesus has done, and what Jesus has yet to do then to argue about dispensational disagreements. Nonetheless it is profitable for us to at least understand each other as the Christian church on earth looks forward to the return of Christ. Maranatha - come Lord Jesus! The first point that is important for us to understand is that we in the Christian church should all be in agreement that there will be a rapture because it says so in the Bible! The question is not about if there is a rapture, even if you are opposed to that terminology. The real question is when will it be? I think it is helpful for us to see the following Scripture in its entirety as we grasp Paul's instructions about Jesus' return.

"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18)

The phrase that Paul uses in verse 17 where it says "will be caught up" is a Greek word that means to be lifted up and the Latin word used to translate it is "raptura". Therefore, as translators, scholars, and clergy studied this passage throughout history they began to refer to it as the rapture. Although there is much disagreement about when it will happen there should not be any disagreement that it *will* happen. Unfortunately, this has become a point of tension and distress in the church which is exactly the opposite of Paul's intention in this section of Scripture where he says "encourage one another with these words." Jesus will come again. Jesus will come on the clouds. There will be a trumpet call. Jesus will rapture the church.

Admittedly there is much disagreement about how and when this rapture will occur, but as Christians we should be focusing on our agreement and unity around the essentials of Christ rather than fighting, arguing, and slandering one another. For those who believe in a pre tribulation rapture they see these verses at the beginning of Revelation 4 being the place where Jesus comes for the church. They point to the sound of the trumpet and also Jesus' words "come up here" as evidence that the rapture takes place here and that the scene that is present in chapters 4 and 5 are where the church is located during the time of tribulation. I have to admit that I really hope this is true as a follower of Christ because the other alternative is that I have to be here for either part or all of the tribulation. I am not saying that theologically that I am convinced on the idea but it sure would be nice. The problem is that if that is what I am expecting to happen and then all of a sudden there is tribulation, war, famine, and persecution I will be tempted to be disheartened and disillusioned wondering why Jesus didn't come for me. As we look at the whole of Scripture and understand the ways of God it has been much more common for God to expect His people to endure through hardship rather than remove them from it entirely because it acts as a purifying substance. Whether it is Noah and his family, Israel in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, or the early church in Rome God has throughout Scripture used the world and surrounding unbelievers to build faith and increase holiness in His followers instead of removing His people to a separate panacea. I am not trying to make a conclusive

argument here, but only to provide perspective about this deeply divided issue and make the point that to insist on complete understanding of the Last Days and the plans of God is dangerous territory for anyone. Regardless of your interpretation of when Christ will return, I think the best mindset for Jesus' disciples is to pray for a pre tribulation rapture, but also be mentally prepared for a post tribulation rapture so that if Christ tarries, we are at least understanding why.

The Day of the Lord will come. There will be an hour of trial. There will be a time of great tribulation on the earth. The Old Testament prophets said it; Daniel said it; Jesus said it; Paul said it; Peter said it; and John said it. Anyone who denies the future tribulation or the Day of the Lord is heretically mistaken at the very least and more likely to be a liar and a thief. [Jesus' Return: What Peter Wrote About the Second Coming of Christ \(bibleproject.com\)](#) Two thirds of the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning Jesus are about His second coming and only one third are about His birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection. If there is any doubt in your mind just try and google Bible verses about "The Day of the Lord". [What is the day of the Lord? | GotQuestions.org](#) These Bible verses are primarily descriptions of Jesus' return, His final judgment, and the last days. There is a great day of tribulation coming and it is in this context and understanding that we enter into the courts of heaven with John to see God in all of His glory and splendor.

V.3-6a Our introduction for chapter 4 contains much of the pertinent information about the throne but let me take this time to describe the twenty-four elders and the seven spirits of God. The twenty-four elders which surround God's throne are seated on their own thrones as well. They are clothed in white garments and have golden crowns on their heads. We are not told about the significance of the number twenty-four and there has been much study and speculation about their meaning. One repeated understanding of these elders is the Old Testament tribes of Israel and the New Testament apostles. Although this is obviously not what John is seeing in his current experience because he is one of those apostles! It is possible nonetheless that these elders are representative of these figures and certainly of all of the saints both old and new. The significance of these elders is that they are called by the normal human term of presbyter or elder but they are not in a normal human existence which makes for an interesting perspective as we potentially see glorified saints expressing their heartfelt praise around the throne. We are not meant to think that this is a position or posture of all of those who are saved but a special group tasked with the continual honor of worshiping before the throne. Another possibility about the significance of the number twenty-four is that in the Old Testament when David divided the Levites into groups for serving in the temple he chose 24,000 officers, gatekeepers, and musicians. More specifically, he also organized twenty-four priests to serve before the Lord and twenty-four musicians who were chosen by lot to complete their appointed duties. (1 Chronicles 23-25).

The seven torches of fire that are described as the seven spirits of God can be understood to be the complete omniscience and omnipresence of the Lord in all the earth. We see these seven spirits of God described four different times in this book - as being before the throne (Rev. 1:4-5); being held by Jesus (Rev. 3:1); as seven burning lamps (Rev. 4:5); and as seven eyes and horns (Rev. 5:6). We are not to understand seven literal spirits but one Holy Spirit in His completeness and fulness as indicated by the typical understanding of the number seven in Scripture. This understanding is also emphasized by Zechariah's description of the golden lampstand where he indicates "these seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the

whole earth.” (Zechariah 4:10b) The other significant understanding of these seven spirits has often been described as the fulness of the sevenfold manifestations of the Spirit. This is understood to be the description in Isaiah 11:2 where we see the Spirit of God described in its fullness: The Spirit of the Lord; The Spirit of wisdom; The Spirit of understanding; The Spirit of counsel; The Spirit of strength; The Spirit of knowledge; and The Spirit of the fear of the Lord. So whether it is a representation of the seven fold Spirit or the fullness of God’s Spirit we see the significance of seeing the Father on the throne with the Son showing John the scene, and the Spirit burning in His fulness all in this same scene in chapter 4.

V.6b-8 The four living creatures are mentioned in conjunction with the throne here in Revelation and also in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1. The implication is that anytime that God reveals a detailed vision of the throne that these living creatures are present. This understanding also comes from this passage where we see that their activity is described as day and night - never stopping their praise to God. Their positioning is amidst the throne indicating that they are in an inner circle around the throne providing a barrier of endless praise that is never interrupted. These living creatures are understood to be a special class of angelic beings given the express purpose of serving the throne of God. In Isaiah these creatures are referred to as Seraphim and in Ezekiel they are referred to as Cherubim but their similarities suggest that they could be the same type of angelic being. In Isaiah and Revelation, they are described with six wings and in Ezekiel they are described with four wings. Their faces are not described in Isaiah and in Ezekiel it is indicated that they have four faces each. In Revelation they are described as having one face each but having the same type of faces as in Ezekiel (lion, ox, man, eagle). You can see how similarly they are described although not exactly which reminds us to focus on their function and purpose more than their outward appearance. What is most important about these creatures is what they say: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” This profession by these holy creatures reminds us of the perfection of God’s holiness which is repeated three times; the great power of El Shaddai; and the eternal nature of God who always was and always will be. These attributes are the essence of God’s character and are worth repeating for all of eternity.

V.9-11 Somehow these living creatures are interrelated with the twenty-four elders because we are told that whenever the living creatures engage in some way in their praise that a response by the elders is initiated. This response is described as the twenty-four elders falling prostrate before the throne and worshipping. They cast their crowns before the throne of God and they respond with their own chorus in unison with the living creatures as I imagine in perfect harmony and pitch. Incidentally, this is the verse of Scripture where the musical group “Casting Crowns” got their name which is extremely applicable for a worship band. These elders declare “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.” As we examine the worship of these elders, I think it is applicable for us in the church to evaluate our worship in the context of their words and actions. It would be natural for us to deduce that this is prototypical of worshipping God and that words like these and actions similar to these should characterize our worship as well. If I had to personally evaluate the worship of the universal church, I would say that we have done a much better job encapsulating the words of worship than the actions. This is not to dictate the necessity of any words or actions precipitated by God because worship that is necessitated is no genuine worship at all. But at the same time, we can see that this scene in heaven and others that we see throughout Scripture should help us evaluate and prioritize our words and actions in the worship of the One True Living God. Throughout this encounter and following in

the next chapter we will see over and over again the elders falling down before the throne to worship. (Rev. 4:10; 5:8; 5:14) We also see that they sang with a loud voice (Rev. 5:12) and as we already mentioned throwing down their crowns. This was not a spectator event. These elders were actively engaged in physically, emotionally, and spiritually worshiping with all of their heart. I am not saying that worship has to be physically engaging to be genuine, but it should certainly be part of how we consider true worship to be conducted. If someone can clap and shout and jump at a football game but is uncomfortable doing the same in their worship of the One True God then I would wonder why the inconsistency and propose that one appears to be a higher priority than the other. This also reminds us especially in contemporary worship circles that our language and verbiage should be God centered instead of man centered. That doesn't mean that there won't be words or songs that describe our response sometimes, but the center of the words for our worship should always be focused on the One who was, and who is, and who is to come. Amen.