

A THRONE IN HEAVEN

Revelation 4:1-8

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, December 2, 2012

At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne (Rev. 4:2).

In 593 B.C., a Jewish priest named Ezekiel was in exile outside of Babylon, where he had been taken into captivity. There, beside the Kebar River, “the hand of the Lord” came upon him (Eze. 1:2) and he saw a remarkable vision. Emerging out of a storm came a bright light flashing with fire, together with “the likeness of four living creatures” (Eze. 1:5), each with four wings and the face of a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Over their heads was a crystal sea and, surrounded by a rainbow, “there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance” (Eze. 1:26).

Over the centuries, Ezekiel’s visions so perplexed the Jewish rabbis that some sought to remove it from the canon. One rabbi, Hananiah ben Hezekiah, is said to have burned three hundred barrels of oil in his lamp staying up late seeking to make sense of this prophet.¹ Its true interpreter was the coming of the New Testament, and along these lines the visions in Revelation 4 and Ezekiel 1 are helpful for the interpretation of each other.

The point of Ezekiel’s vision was to display the sovereignty of God, in a time of woe. The Babylonian emperor ruled from his throne, but the trials facing Jerusalem ultimately came from God’s higher throne. This was Ezekiel’s great hope in his exile far from home: even in judgment, God would be faithful to his covenant promises to save.

¹ Cited from Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, New International Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 18.

As the book of Revelation begins its series of prophetic visions of events present and future, the apostle John received virtually the same vision as the one presented to Ezekiel seven centuries earlier. While some details are different, the similarities between Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4 are striking, and the message for John was the same as Ezekiel's. Though John was an exile on Patmos and though the churches of Asia faced looming persecution from the throne of Caesar in Rome, it was God who truly reigned over history. This message is important for Christians today, who are pilgrims in a world that is not our home. As we prepare to face tribulation in our own day, we also are to know that our trials are all controlled by a faithful God and thus are certain to result in our salvation and the overthrow of evil.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Revelation is organized in seven sections, each presenting the history of the church age from God's perspective in heaven. These seven cycles become increasingly intense as they advance, and they increasingly narrow their focus towards the end of history. The key to identifying the sections is to note where Christ's return and the final judgment are described. Dispensationalists read Revelation as one continuous history, from chapters 1-22, resulting in complex and confusing explanations for the recurring depictions of Christ's return and God's final wrath. Revelation makes much better sense, however, when we recognize seven sections that present parallel depictions of history, each with their own perspective.

Revelation 4:1 begins the book's second section, a cycle which modestly begins looking forward into history. Jesus summons John, saying, "I will show you what must take place after this." Chapters 4 and 5 depict the present reality at the throne of heaven, and chapter 6 shows breaking of the six seals of God's plan, concluding with "the wrath of the Lamb" from which the wicked vainly seek to hide (6:16-17). Chapter 7 concludes the second section with the praise of the redeemed in the glory of the age to come.

Knowing what is to come, we can understand why this vision focuses on the throne in heaven. William Hendriksen writes: "The purpose of this vision is to show us, in beautiful symbolism, that all things are

governed by the Lord on the throne.”² The visions that follow involve increasingly frightening scenes. The throne in heaven is therefore shown first to give comfort to believers in the midst of deadly trials. As Psalm 99:1 puts it: “The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!”

This vision begins with John looking and, “behold, a door standing open in heaven!” (Rev. 4:1). Like many prophets of old, such as Isaiah and Ezekiel, and like Moses who was summoned atop Mount Sinai, John is called into God’s presence by the voice of Christ: “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place” (Rev. 4:1). An upward glance is often a sign of a new perspective, just as trumpets herald a new revelation, and for these John will be admitted to the heavenly tabernacle where God is enthroned in glory. This door is the third mentioned in Revelation. The first was a door of opportunity for ministry (Rev. 3:8) and the second was the closed door of the church on which Christ knocked for admittance (Rev. 3:20). This is a door of revelation so that John could see the things of God. Dispensationalists wrongly interpret John’s summons as the rapture of the church in the end times. This completely misreads the text. Instead, John is taken up “in the Spirit” (Rev. 1:2), who acted upon his senses and understanding so that John could be present symbolically in the true tabernacle above.

There, John saw “a throne” that “stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne” (Rev. 4:2). God’s throne is mentioned 38 times in the book of Revelation, 17 of them in chapters 4 and 5. This is similar to the vision Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting upon a throne” (Isa. 6:1) during a crisis of sovereignty in Jerusalem, and even more closely to Ezekiel’s vision of God’s throne beside the Kebar River. G. B. Caird writes of John’s vision on the Isle of Patmos: “To those who must live under the shadow of Caesar’s throne, and find that that shadow is made darker by the shadow of Satan’s throne (2:13), the one truth that matters above all others is that there is a greater throne above.”³

In addition to the symbolism of the throne, there are other indicators of God’s sovereignty in the vision. Notice that Christ’s voice says, “I will show you what must take place after this” (Rev. R:1). Christ can foretell the future because he reigns sovereign over it. History does

² Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 84.

³ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (San Francisco: Harper, 1966), 62.

not consist of what *may* happen or even merely what *will* happen, but what *must* happen because it is ordained by the divine sovereign will. Moreover, God's sovereignty is highlighted by the placement of the throne at the center of all created reality, with angelic beings, the redeemed church, and hosts of angels around God's throne and responding to him. When Christians think of God's sovereignty we often think of his saving grace. But Revelation equally emphasizes God's sovereignty over the trials and persecutions facing his church, ordained by God for their good and his glory. We will see this reality emphasized throughout Revelation as the judgments and woes go forth from his throne out upon the earth (6:1-8, 16; 8:3-6; 16:17).

God's sovereign control over both judgment and salvation must have been a great comfort to exiles like Ezekiel and the apostle John. It also gave hope to Alan Cameron, a Scottish Covenanter awaiting execution for refusing to accept the Scottish king's authority over Christ's church. The day before Cameron's execution, the royal authorities put his son, Richard, to death on the same charges. They cruelly brought the severed head and hands down to the elder Cameron's jail cell asking if he could recognize them. "I know them, I know them," he answered. "They are my son's, my own dear son's." But instead of his faith being overthrown by this anguish, as was intended, Cameron drew strength from the sovereignty of his Lord. He said, "It is the Lord. Good is the will of the Lord, who cannot wrong me nor mine, but has made goodness and mercy to follow us all our days."⁴ It is believers who rejoice in God's sovereign control who have peace to endure great trials. Paul wrote: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28).

THE CENTRALITY OF WORSHIP

Revelation 4 is justly considered one of the great chapters of the Bible, alongside John 3, Romans 8, and Hebrews 7. It shows not only the sovereignty of God over all of history, but also the worship of God as the central activity of history. This point is depicted in verses 4-6: "Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders... And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures." As John's vision centers

⁴ Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 87-8.

all creation on the realities of heaven, so also the heavenly occupation with the worship of God is creation's highest calling. Vern Poythress comments: "God is the all-important, all-determining spiritual center and power center for the universe." Therefore, "Creatures find their consummate fulfillment, the meaning and full satisfaction of their existence, in worshiping, serving, and adoring him."⁵

Gathered around the throne in the heavenly holy-of-holies, John saw two remarkable gatherings. First, he mentions "twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads" (Rev. 4:4). One theory about these elders points to 1 Chronicles 24:7-18, which organized Israel's priests into twenty-four shifts of duty, as were the temple singers (1 Chron. 25:6-31), and sees these elders as their angelic counterparts before God's heavenly throne. More likely, the twenty-four heavenly elders correspond to the twelve patriarchs of Israel combined with the twelve apostles, in this way symbolizing the redeemed church of both testaments. This parallels the vision of Revelation 21, where "the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel" are inscribed on the gates of the heavenly city, and the wall has twelve foundations on which are written the names of "the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (vv. 12-14).

This vision is of great significance to believers on earth, especially those threatened with tribulation. Notice that in this heavenly depiction of history, the Christian church is given the most prominent place close to the throne of God. While the world looks upon the church and Christians as being the most insignificant people – this was especially the case of the seven churches in Asia to which John was writing – they are actually the most significant people, since they bear the testimony to the gospel of Christ, and their worship is the most significant activity taking place in the world. Moreover, when we think of the martyrs who had already died and those of the early church threatened with death, what wonderful news it was to see the redeemed church not only alive but reigning with Christ in glory.

Another reason to be confident that the twenty-four elders correspond to the church is the description John highlights: they were "clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads" (Rev. 4:4). This

⁵ Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 98, 100.

represents the consummation of the salvation promised and begun on earth. The white garments signify the righteous granted to Christians through Christ and their calling to lives of holiness. Jesus wrote to Sardis saying that those “who have not soiled their garments... will walk with me in white, for they are worthy” (Rev. 3:4). A crown is the reward for true believers, who in Christ triumph over sin: “Be faithful unto death,” Jesus wrote to Smyrna, “and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). Jesus had promised at the end of his seven letters that “the one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev. 3:21). These blessings, now dramatized in the vision of chapter 4, represent not merely the reward of certain choice believers but of all true Christians, those who not only profess faith in Jesus but live in faith to the end. Paul Gardner writes: “This is how it will be for all the redeemed. They will be in the presence of God and will reign with him and with Jesus.”⁶ James Ramsey wrote:

They are your representative, believer. Those thrones, and crowns, and priestly robes are yours. That position round and near to the throne of a covenant God is yours. Such is the place you occupy in the spiritual kingdom of God. Its purity, honour, power, and nearness to God are indeed, as yet, yours actually but in part; but if you are His at all in the covenant of His love, they shall be yours in actual possession, in all the glorious fullness of blessing and privilege which they imply, yours forever.”⁷

In this way, John’s vision reminds us of the high calling of every Christian life. Peter thus described us as “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Like the faithful in Sardis, we are called to see that we do not defile our garments (Rev. 3:4), and like the saints of Philadelphia, we are urged to hold fast to what we have in Christ, in order to be assured of our heavenly crown (Rev. 3:11).

Along with the joined saints of the Old and New Testaments gather before the throne, John saw mysterious beings beside God’s throne: “on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind” (Rev. 4:6). We would have difficulty identifying these beings were they not present in the vision of Ezekiel 1. There,

⁶ Paul Gardner, 71.

⁷ James Ramsey, *Revelation: An Exposition of the First III Chapters*, Geneva Commentaries (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 231.

the “four living creatures” (Eze. 1:5) have the same appearance as in Revelation 4, with only slight modifications. Moreover, in Ezekiel 10 they are identified as “cherubim,” the mighty angelic attendants of God’s throne. These were the glorious beings symbolized in gold atop the ark of the covenant, which was deemed the footstool of God’s throne on earth. Like Ezekiel’s cherubim, John’s four living beings are covered in eyes and appear in four guises: “the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight” (Rev. 4:7). These four faces represent the living creatures on earth. Along with man (the highest earthly creature), is “a lion (the highest wild animal), an ox (the highest domesticated animal, and an eagle (the highest bird) – symbolizing the fact that they embody within themselves all of the highest attributes of living creation.”⁸

When you consider the four living creatures, standing for the created order of living beings, together with the redeemed church, and add the myriads of angels that 5:11 says are gathered around the believers, you have all those who will dwell in the eternal glory assembled around heaven’s throne doing the single most important activity of all time: the worship of God. Therefore, the purpose of John’s vision was not only to remind beleaguered believers of the sovereignty of God on the throne in heaven but also the great calling of his people to give him glory in all things and at all times. James Boice summarizes: “Because God is in control of all things we and all the creation must make it our primary activity and duty to worship him.”⁹

THE CENTRALITY OF GOD IN WORSHIP

Frank L. Baum’s classic book, *The Wizard of Oz*, tells of a girl, Dorothy, who like John on Patmos was an exile, having been blown by a tornado out of her home in Kansas. Needing help in a dangerous world, Dorothy makes a pilgrimage to the Emerald City, together with the tin man who needs a heart, a cowardly lion who lack courage, and a scarecrow missing a brain. Finally they appear before the great and powerful Wizard of Oz, replete with trumpet blasts and spouts of flame. But when the curtain is pulled back a little man is

⁸ Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 58-9.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 13:4.

revealed pulling levers and pushing buttons. The mighty wizard was a fraud who could do little to help anyone in real need.¹⁰

What a difference there was when John entered the inner sanctum of heaven. With the curtains drawn back and the door opened, John saw an awesome God who is almighty to accomplish all his will. He had already seen that God is enthroned as sovereign, along with the centrality of worship. Thirdly, John's vision teaches the centrality of God in worship. Already we have observed that because of God's sovereignty he is to be adored and served. But God is the great "because" of worship in all his attributes. John's vision displays a collage of images showing that we worship because of all that God is.

Having noted the *sovereignty* of God, the next obvious thing to note about John's vision is the *glory* of God. Note how John makes no attempt to describe the "one seated on the throne" (Rev. 4:2). Paul said that God "dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). Therefore, John describes the sounds, lights, and colors that radiate from the glory of the enthroned Lord. The closest he comes to depicting God's glory is to say that he "had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald" (Rev. 4:3).

The modern day jasper is a dull opaque stone, but Revelation 21:11 describes it as "clear as crystal." Scholars thus think this was what we call a diamond. The carnelian, or sardius, stone was blood red. These were joined with an emerald rainbow to present a staggering picture of divine beauty. "The stones intensify the light around the throne by reflecting the unapproachable brightness, and hence glory, surrounding God himself."¹¹ Such visible glory, which John can scarcely put into words, prompts the worship of God in heaven.

As the "because" of worship, the Lord is further revealed as the *faithful*, covenant-keeping God. This aspect of God is depicted by the emerald rainbow that encircles his throne. The rainbow was the emblem of God's covenant with Noah, which promised God's mercy to hold off judgment until the full number of the redeemed are gathered (Gen. 9:13). This vision highlights God's sovereignty as Creator and so his faithfulness in covenant to the creation is glorified.

¹⁰ This illustration is borrowed from Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 95.

¹¹ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 321.

In contrast to earthly rainbows, this bow completes a full circle, emphasizes God's eternal faithfulness. Moreover, the emerald rainbow is more than a hint that just as God provided a new, cleansed world for Noah and his family, God's covenant will usher in a new, green creation for those who trust in him. Paul Gardner writes: "Here, in picture form, is a warning not to interpret the disasters which will be talked about in the next part of the visions as if God had forgotten his promises to Noah. Even while God sits on the judgment throne, he is surrounded by his own covenant promises."¹²

God is further worshiped because of his *power*. This is probably the significance of "the sea of glass, like crystal" before God's throne (Rev. 4:6). There are numerous possible interpretations for this "sea," including the creation firmament that separated heaven from earth, which here would show God's transcendence. Or the sea could refer to the washing basins before the tabernacle, where the priests came to wash before serving, which would be a symbol of the cleansing grace of God in Christ. Most likely, however, especially in light of Revelation's later usage, the sea is a symbol for the chaos of unbelief and rebellion in the world against God. In Revelation, the first beast, who symbolizes government oppression, arises out of the sea (13:1). With this in mind, the "sea of glass," represented the chaos of evil and unbelief that has been subdued by God's power. As God parted the Red Sea for Israel to pass over unscathed, God has subdued all evil and tumult so that his people can draw near to worship. In chapter 5, we find that Christ's death and resurrection has overcome the power of evil. Likewise, as Jesus once calmed the winds and the waves with his voice, he remains able today to give peace to the heart alarmed by the winds and waves of trouble in the world.

God is the great "because" of worship, not least in his *grace*, which is represented not only by the emerald rainbow but also by the seven torches of fire burning before the throne, "which are the seven spirits of God" (Rev. 4:5). Seven speaks of completion and thus the all-sufficient ministry of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit-inspired Word, God sends light from his throne to bring salvation to his people. In Revelation 1:4, John declared "grace... and peace," from God by means of "the seven spirits who are before his throne." In a similar vision, Zechariah 4:6 spoke of God's saving grace, saying,

¹² Gardner, 70.

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.”

Finally, God is worshiped because he is *holy*. The “flashes of lighting, and rumbling and peals of thunder” (Rev. 4:5), speak of God’s glory in general but especially his holiness. The clear parallel is to the lightning and thunder that boomed from Mount Sinai when the Lord was present giving his law. God’s holiness is one of the chief causes of his worship. The four living creatures before the throne: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8). Because of the glory of all his attributes, God is himself always at the center of worship and is alone the recipient of the adoration of his people.

CHRIST’S SUMMONS TO THE THRONE

When we remember God’s holiness, see the majesty of his throne, and then spy the fearful cherubic guardians, the pressing question is how any of us could ever enter this scene of worship. We remember that images of cherubim were woven into the veil that separated Israelites from the holy of holies and kept them from the presence of God’s holiness. A mighty cherub was given the flaming sword to bar fallen Adam from the tree of life (Gen. 3:24). How, then, will we enter the heavenly tabernacle to worship God in the presence of the four living creatures, since we have broken his laws and have stained our garments in sin?

The answer is not for us to perform works of our own to commend us to God, since the problem of our sin is too difficult and the record of our past sins condemns us. The answer for us is the same as that for John. Even the apostle entered the heavenly glory only when Jesus called to him, saying, “Come” (Rev. 4:1). Jesus calls us, saying, “Come,” to the cross, where his blood cleansed us from the guilt of sin once for all. Jesus invites us to the empty tomb, where his resurrection provides conquering life for those who believe. And now Jesus bids us to look into heaven and see what is ours if we come to God through faith in him alone. Christ has prepared clean garments, crowns, and thrones for all who answer his summons. Have you come to Christ? He calls you, even now, saying, “Come.” The last chapter of Revelation tells us of our place in the eternal temple, and of the

glory that will belong to us, if we answer Jesus' call to come and walk before God through faith in his Son:

No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face... They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever (Rev. 22:3-4).