

“APOCALYPSE SOON”

“A Look Inside Heaven” (Revelation 4:1-6a)

The Holy Spirit divides the Book of Revelation into three basic sections, “*Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.*” (Rev. 1:19) Most commentators divide the book into the following basic sections:

Revelation 1 – (Historical – “*things which thou hast seen*” - John’s Vision of Christ)

Revelation 2-3 (Historical – “*things which are*” in the 7 churches)

Revelation 4-19 (Future – “*the things which shall be hereafter*” - Great Tribulation Period)

Revelation 20 (Future – Millennium and Great White Throne Judgment)

Revelation 21-22 (Future – Eternal Golden Age)

After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. (v1)

The Book of Revelation now pivots to a new direction in chapter 4 into a future prophetic section, “*After this I looked...*” A voice summoned John up from earth to heaven to witness this new transition, “*Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter.*” John was going to get an exciting insight into what heaven will be like. He would write the greatest description of heaven found in the Bible.

It is important to note that John used many symbols and signs to describe heaven but not everything is purely symbolic. Care must be taken to make this distinction. We also need to note that the symbols or signs were used to point to real things. Of course the symbol or sign is always less than the glory of the reality.

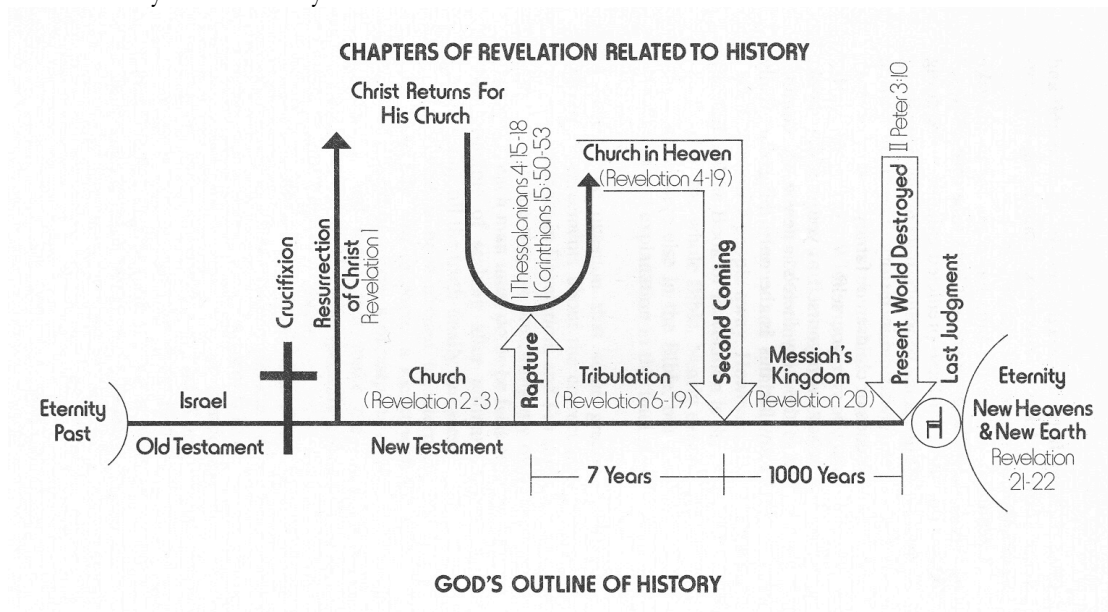
The scene has shifted from earth to heaven and from the present age into the future. After we have this insight into heaven and its worship in Revelation 4-5, the scene will shift again to God’s Tribulation judgments upon the earth in Revelation 6-19.

PRE-TRIBULATION VIEW

Many commentators, who take the pre-Tribulation premillennial view of eschatology, see this verse as signifying the transition from the Church Age (as the church is not explicitly mentioned in chapters 4-19) to God’s future dealings in Tribulation Judgment on the earth and His revival of the nation of Israel. This is the period that God focuses particularly in dealing with Israel in judgment and salvation, “*Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it.*” (Jer. 30:7) The Pre-Trib advocates believe that chapters 4-5 are simply a prologue to the unleashing of the terrible apocalyptic Tribulations judgments of Revelation 6-19. Somewhere between Revelation 4-6 the rapture of the church occurs. John MacArthur argues,

“Remember back in chapter 3 verse 10 there was the promise from the Lord to the church that because you have kept the Word of My perseverance, I will also keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world to test those who dwell upon the earth....it seems that the Lord is there saying, “I will deliver

you from that coming hour of testing.” And so we can assume that as the testing unfolds in chapter 6 and the prologue to it in chapter 4 and 5 and the church is not mentioned, that they have already been delivered.”



And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. And He that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. (v2-3)

John was immediately translated or raptured from the isolation of the island of Patmos into the glory of heaven in this vision. The contrasts could not have been greater. Space may be billions of light years in dimensions but time, space, and matter are no limitation on the Creator. The first thing that John saw in this peek behind the curtain of heaven is a throne. Everything else was seen in relation to this throne. It was the centerpiece of this vision. This word “*throne*” is a key word in Revelation 4-5. It occurs 17 times in Revelation 4 and 5 and more than 45 times in the whole book (more times that the other 26 books of the NT combined).

THE THRONE

The throne is a symbol of God’s authority and sovereign rule over this universe. This throne is said to be, “*set in heaven.*” This pictures a throne that is immovable and fixed for God to rule permanently through all the ages of time and eternity, “*The LORD shall reign for ever, even thy God, O Zion, unto all generations. Praise ye the LORD.*” (Psa. 146:10 cf. Exod. 15:18) This is in stark contrast to the thrones of man’s kingdoms, which rise and fall in the passing of time. It reminds us all that no matter if things on earth appear to be chaotic or random that our sovereign God is fully in control as the One, “*who liveth for ever and ever.*” (v9b) We need to interpret our lives and circumstances from the foundation of this great truth that our Almighty and Sovereign God is sitting on His throne permanently ruling this universe. Hence, we should sing with those in heaven in all our changing circumstances, “*Praise our God, all ye His servants, and ye that fear Him, both small and great. . . . Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.*” (Rev. 19:5-6)

The throne was not vacant awaiting a king to come and rule but John then saw the One who “*sat on the throne.*” This verb that is translated “*sat*” is in the present continuous tense. God is ruling and will continue to rule over heaven and earth. He sits at the centre of power of this universe. We are not told explicitly who was on the throne but we can deduce that it was God

the Father as the Son approached the throne in Revelation 4:5 and the Holy Spirit was pictured as before the throne in Revelation 4:5. The Father is the One stated as ruling on the throne in heaven in multiple passages, *“I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up”* (Isa. 6:1; cf. I Kings 22:19; Psa. 47:8)

John did not attempt to precisely describe the person and presence of God as such a description defies human descriptive powers. God is a Person that no sinner can look on directly, *“dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see...”* (1 Tim. 6:16; cf. Exodus 33:20; John 1:18; 1 John 4:12) John could only use comparative terms *“like to”* as a means to describe the presence and glory of God radiating from the throne, *“And He that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.”*

SARDIUS & JASPER STONES

Jasper is a stone that Revelation 21:11 describes as *“clear as crystal”* and sardine is a stone that has a fiery, blood ruby-red colour. It is surely not coincidental that both these two stones are in the breastplate of the High Priest of Israel,

And thou shalt set in it settings of stones, even four rows of stones: the first row shall be a sardius, a topaz, and a carbuncle: this shall be the first row. And the second row shall be an emerald, a sapphire, and a diamond. And the third row a ligure, an agate, and an amethyst. And the fourth row a beryl, and an onyx, and a jasper: they shall be set in gold in their inclosings. And the stones shall be with the names of the children of Israel, twelve, according to their names, like the engravings of a signet; every one with his name shall they be according to the twelve tribes. (Exod. 28:17-21)

The first and the last stones on this breastplate are the sardius or sardine stone and the jasper stone that we are told represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Presumably the sardine stone represents the tribe of the firstborn, Rueben (name means “Behold a son”) and the jasper the youngest tribe of Benjamin (name means “son of my right hand). It is also surely not by coincidence that these two stones are part of the 12 precious jewels in the foundation walls of the New Jerusalem,

And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.And the building of the wall of it was of jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; The fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the

ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst. (Rev. 21:10-14; 18-20)

These walls we are told explicitly were linked to the 12 apostles. So these two stones the blood-red sardine/sardius and the crystal-clear jasper in both the breastplate and the walls of the New Jerusalem we must assume represent God's covenantal relationships with Israel and the NT Church. There may well be a message from God the Father pointing to the Lord Jesus Christ as "*the glory of God*" for the Rueben sardine stone speaks, "behold a Son" and the Benjamin crystal-clear jasper stone points us to the "Son of the right hand." It was Christ Himself who declared,

Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou *then*, Shew us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? (John 14:9-10a)

RAINBOW

There was also a rainbow in an unbroken circular sphere around this throne, "*and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.*" The emerald rainbow in the Bible is a symbol of God's continual evergreen faithfulness to His covenant promises. It reminds us that although He is a God of wrath and judgment on sin, He is also a God of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Hebrews 4:16 describes it as the, "*throne of grace.*" This symbol was given to Noah as a token of those attributes of God. It is a glorious reminder that our God's wrath against sin does not overturn His grace and promises to His saints. This will be an important reminder to John and his readers in the midst of the next 15 chapters of coming apocalyptic judgments of the Great Tribulation Period and the Millennium. Spurgeon makes a helpful application,

"Oh! Child of God! Thy heavenly Father in his sovereignty, *has a right to do with you, his child, as he pleases, but he will never let that sovereignty get out of the limit of the covenant.* As a sovereign, he might cast you away, but he has promised that he never will, and never will he. As a sovereign, he might leave you to perish, but he has said, 'I will not leave thee nor forsake thee.' As a sovereign, he might suffer you to be tempted beyond your strength, but he has promised that no temptation shall happen to you, but such as is common to man, and he will with the temptation make a way of escape.

And round about the throne were four and twenty seats; and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. (v4)

The scene then reveals 24 elders clothed in white raiment sitting around the throne of God. The "*seats*" here is the same word that is translated "*throne*" in v2 so these 24 elders are also crowned and on thrones. God will make His saints to reign with Him, "*And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father.*" (Rev. 1:6a) The "*white raiment*" surely signifies the clothing of the saints with the garments of Christ's righteousness and the "*crowns of gold*" the victor's crown (1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 4:8). These saints are at rest on these thrones as their battle is over and they are worshipping for eternity in perfect peace, "*And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.*" (Rev. 14:13; cf. Dan. 12:13)

There is much dispute about *who* these 24 elders are, as John does not explicitly identify them. Some say they represent the church and others argue they are representative of Israel.

Others believe that they are simply angelic beings. The best way to view them is to first of all look at the immediate context and then other clues in the Book of Revelation. We know that these 24 elders are giving glory to God in Revelation 4 and singing a song of worship to Christ in Revelation 5,

And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; (Rev. 5:9)

Their worship is a song of thanksgiving for redemption for them personally from “*every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.*” We know that the number 12 represents the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles in Revelation 21. We also know that the glory of God seen in the jasper and sardius stone on the throne is a symbol of both the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles. It is also a fact that both Israel and the Church were headed up by elders in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. These elders were representatives of the people. So putting the evidence together it is likely that these 24 elders represent the redeemed from the Old Testament Church of Israel and the New Testament Church of both Jew and Gentile who make up the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12,13; Eph. 5:30). All give continual glory to God and are united in worship of the Lamb because the same Gospel redeemed all by the same Saviour. Furthermore, they may be 24 also like the rotational priestly courses in the Old Testament (1 Chron. 24:3-5, 18) as they represent all believers in a rotational basis.

And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal.... (v5-6a)

Lightning, thunder, and voices are associated with God’s presence in the OT (cf. Exod. 19:16; Ezekiel 1:13). They are also associated with moments of God’s awesome judgment. Although heaven is a place of glory, worship, and rest for the saints of God, it is also a place where God’s sovereign power and judgment upon sinners will be displayed. The fear of God is the beginning of true worship.

These, “*seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God*” are symbols of the fullness of the Holy Spirit. John brought greetings from the Father and the Holy Spirit in a similar symbol in Revelation one, “*Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne.*” (Rev. 1:4b) The “*seven Spirits*” here is simply a symbol of the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the seven churches (cf. Isaiah 11:2; Zech. 4:1-10).

We are also told that “*before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal.*” This may well be the same paved clear foundation as described by Moses, “*And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness.*” (Exod. 24:10) We also read in Ezekiel’s vision of a crystal “*firmament*” (Ezekiel 1:22) that was the foundation for the throne of God. This crystal sea of glass may well represent God’s purity and calls our attention to the fact that God is light, who reveals, and unmasks the darkness. This pure “*sea*” may also parallel the laver in the OT Tabernacle to indicate that the only way to approach God is by being washed by the Word of God (Eph. 5:26). Heaven is a place where God’s presence, power, and glory are reflected and manifested through these awesome sounds and sights that defy human imagination to perfectly describe.

For 10 July 2016

Cornerstone Church Bible Class