

WORSHIP GOD WHO SITS ON THE THRONE

Revelation 4:1-11

Key Verse: 4:8b

“Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,’ who was, and is, and is to come.”

As we studied the seven churches in chapters 2-3, we heard Christ speak to real churches where real people struggled in a real world. Out of his great love, as head of the church, Christ commended, rebuked, counseled, and promised rewards to his churches. In chapters 4-5, the scene shifts drastically from the churches to the throne of God, from earth to heaven, from reality to spiritual vision. It is a heavenly worship service, focused on God the Creator and the Lamb who was slain. Why does Christ show this vision to the Apostle John? God was about to judge the world for its evil and wickedness, and he reveals his plan in chapters 6-19. God would expose Satan, who was working evil behind the scenes, and judge him and all his followers. Before revealing these judgments, God wanted John to grasp more fully who he is. He is the Holy, Almighty God who has the will and power to judge all evil completely. This knowledge of God would give John and the churches conviction of final victory. With this conviction they could endure persecution and testify about Christ. Compared to them, we are in a very favorable situation. We have freedom and opportunity, but many of us don't share the gospel or teach the Bible. It is because we are intimidated by the evil of this world. Yet we yearn to be spiritual warriors who stand for Christ without compromise. How can we? We need a fresh vision of God on his throne. This vision can transform our minds, hearts, attitudes, and worldview. John described his vision of God on his throne in heaven in verses 1-6a. God on his throne is praised and worshiped in verses 6b-11. Let's pray to visualize this scene and grasp its deep meaning.

First, a vision of God on his throne (1-6a). Verse 1a says, “After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven.” What John saw was amazing, and it captured his attention. It was a door standing open in heaven. To some people, heaven is just a concept, which sounds vague. But the Bible portrays heaven as the superior reality, of which the earth is only a copy or shadow (Heb 8:5; 11:16). “Heaven” is mentioned 47 times in Revelation. It is the dwelling place of God. Though heaven is real, it is not normally accessible to human beings. But here God opened a door to heaven for John. He invited John to see beyond the earthly realm into another dimension, a heavenly one. Then John heard a loud voice, like a trumpet--the same authoritative and commanding voice which had spoken to him in his first vision (1:10). It was the Son of God who said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this” (1b). At once John was in the Spirit and caught up into a prophetic vision (2a). We don't fully understand what happened to John. A similar experience was had by Apostle Paul. Paul did not know if he was in the body or out of the body; only God knew. Yet Paul was caught up in paradise

and heard inexpressible things (2Co 12:3-4). He was not permitted to tell what he saw. But John was commanded to do so; his vision gives us insight into heavenly reality. These days many people claim to have visited heaven in a “near death experience.” Some accounts are compelling. Yet they are not really reliable. In fact, they can be misleading. In contrast, Apostle John’s vision became part of the Bible; it is trustworthy. Let’s make John’s vision our own.

The vision John saw was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it (2b). “Throne” is a keyword in the book of Revelation, where it appears 47 times (ESV). It refers to God’s throne 40 times, to Satan’s throne three times (2:13; 13:2; 16:10), and to the thrones of 24 elders and a mysterious group of godly beings four times (4:4[2]; 11:16; 20:4 ESV). Satan’s throne opposes God’s throne and is destroyed (16:10). The other thrones are subordinate to God’s throne; those on them worship and serve God. God’s throne alone is supreme. God’s throne is beyond comparison to worldly thrones. God’s power, glory, and majesty are beyond imagination. God is beyond comparison to worldly kings, who are selfish and greedy. God is holy, righteous, just, compassionate, and full of love and peace. God is the center of all creation and he has power to judge. This power is symbolized by his throne. Everything in this passage is related to his throne. We find one who is “on the throne,” what happens “around the throne,” what comes “from the throne,” and what stands “in front of the throne.”

“On the throne.” John saw someone sitting on the throne. There is no mention of this one’s name or features, though John describes other beings in detail. Even in this vision, John could not see God. Apostle Paul described God as the one “who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1Ti 6:16). John described what he saw as having the appearance of jasper and ruby (3a). Jasper stones were generally bright red and opaque, though they could also be amber or green and translucent. Ruby, which was also known as sardius or carnelian, looks like a bright, red diamond. Encircling the throne was a rainbow that shone like an emerald (3b). According to Genesis 9:13-17, a rainbow symbolizes God’s faithfulness, mercy and grace. He continues to manifest these qualities in the midst of judgment. The precious gemstones--jasper, ruby and emerald--express the glory and beauty of God on the throne. Yet, this is just a metaphor. God’s glory is inexpressible through human language or images.

“Around the throne.” Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads (4). The number 24 may symbolize the 12 patriarchs of Israel and the 12 apostles. In any case, these elders on thrones represent God’s people who reign with Christ in his glory (Mt 19:28). Being dressed in white means they were pure and holy. It is because Christ’s righteous covered them by grace, when they put their faith in him (3:4-5, 18). They lived in obedience to him by the Spirit, doing his work (19:8). “Crown” comes from the Greek word “stephanos” which refers to a victor’s crown. Christ promises a victor’s crown to all who keep their faith to the end and willingly participate in his

sufferings (Rev 2:10). These elders represent those like St. Paul who fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith to the end. Christ crowns them with righteousness, life, and eternal glory (1Ti 2:12; 2Ti 4:7-8; 1Pe 5:4). Suffering lasts a little while. The glory Christ gives lasts forever.

“From the throne.” From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder (5a). These display the terrifying splendor of God’s glory, recalling God’s majesty at Mt. Sinai (Ex 19:16). The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear” (Heb 12:21). The awesome display of power coming from the throne previews the wrath God will pour out on his enemies (16:18).

“In front of the throne.” “In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God” (5b). These lamps are not the lampstands mentioned in chapter 1, but torches which burn with fierce, blazing light. Torches are associated with war (Jud 7:16,20). The seven spirits of God are the Holy Spirit in his fullness. God is ready to make war on the devil and his followers and the Holy Spirit is his war torch. Also, in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal (6a). The sea of glass appears in Biblical visions of God’s throne room (Ex 24:10). It is the “ceiling” of the created universe and the “floor” of heaven. Its transparent tranquility shows heaven’s peace in contrast to earth’s turmoil. No matter how troubled the world is, before God’s throne there is tranquility, peace. Amazingly, Christ’s followers have access to God’s throne. Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” In times of turmoil, let’s go to God’s throne and find mercy and grace. Taken as a whole, this scene describes the heavenly court. God reigns on his throne as the Sovereign Ruler. God’s people are in close proximity to him and reign together with him. How glorious is the future of those who trust in Christ!

Second, God on the throne is praised and worshiped (6b-11). In verses 6b-11, John tells us who is in the center and around the throne, and what is directed toward the throne. Verse 6b says, “In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back.” The four living creatures are powerful angelic beings, mentioned by the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel (Isa 6:2; Eze 10:15). They are involved in worship and war. They lead God’s people in worship and are also the instruments of divine judgment in God’s war against his enemies (8; 5:14; 6:1). The word “living creature” indicates that though they are heavenly beings, they are nevertheless created beings. Each living creature has distinctive strengths. They are like a lion, an ox, a man and a flying eagle (7). They also have significant common factors. Each of them have six wings and are covered with eyes all around, even under their wings (8). Perhaps, like the seraphim in Isaiah 6:2, they used two wings to cover their faces, two to cover their feet, and two to fly. With their eyes, they see all injustices and persecution of God’s holy people. Having eyes even under their wings means they have no blind spot that can be taken advantage of. They are always alert, fully aware, and have comprehensive

knowledge. They are well equipped to participate in the execution of God's judgments (6:1-7).

After describing the living creatures, John tells us what they were doing. We might think they would be very busy, doing many things. But their laser focus is on praising God: "Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,' who was, and is, and is to come" (8b). They proclaim three of God's divine attributes: He is holy, almighty and eternal. First, and foremost, he is "holy, holy, holy." This threefold repetition tells us of his absolute purity and utter separation from evil in any and every form. He is untainted by any wrongdoing, unlike angels--some of whom sinned, and humans--all of whom sinned. God hates sin and never condones it. That is why his church should not tolerate sin.

Another aspect of God's holiness is his transcendence of creation. Romans 1:20 tells us that God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, are clearly seen in his creation. Many people are so fascinated by the creation that they worship it, such as the celestial bodies, animals, other human beings, and most of all oneself, and one's children. All of these things can be idols. Whatever we love most, including money, pleasure or power, can be our idol. In the case of Abraham, our forefather of faith, it could have been his son Isaac. So, God tested him by telling him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham was willing to do so, and demonstrated that he worshiped God alone, who is holy. This pleased God and God blessed Abraham greatly. God's holiness also means his complete perfection in love, righteousness, justice, compassion, mercy and all his attributes. For example, God's love is holy love. It never spoils people, like human love can. God's love saves our souls. God wants us to be holy as he is holy (1Pe 1:15-16).

The living creatures next extol his power as the Lord God Almighty. This means that God is the most powerful being of all, devoid of weakness. His power is so strong that no one can oppose him. With his power, he can do whatever he wills effortlessly. His mighty power is exercised according to his will. Many people wonder: "If God is almighty, why does he not save my loved one who is dying?" God's will is inscrutable to us. We cannot answer this question. Only God knows. But one thing is clear from the Bible: if God wills to do something, he will do it. So, he said in Jeremiah 32:27, "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" God's almighty power is seen in creation. He spoke, and it was done. He commanded, and it stood fast (Ps 33:9). He has the power to rule what he has made (1Ch 29:11-12). Especially, God's power was manifest through Jesus' resurrection from the dead; he defeated sin, death and the devil forever. God's mighty power will bring final judgment on all evil forces. In summary, God is almighty to create, to sustain, to save and to judge. This is a great comfort to those who trust in him; it should be a terror to those who oppose him.

The living creatures also praise God as the one who was, and is, and is to come. He is the eternal God who transcends time. He lives for ever and ever (9,10). In Isaiah

46:10a, God says, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come." So, when God foretells what will happen, we should listen. When he says Christ will come again in glory, we should believe him. When he says the judgment of all evil will surely take place, we should believe him. Furthermore, as the one who is eternal, he will give eternal life to those who trust him. At the same time, he will send the wicked to eternal condemnation (Mt 25:46).

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to God on his throne, the twenty-four elders fall down before him and worship him. In an instant they go from their thrones to their knees. They give up their position in order to glorify God fully and uniquely. They lay their crowns before the throne. They honor him as the source of all their victories. They yield their very selves to him and acknowledge him as their Lord. They say: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (9-11). The elders' act is a yielding to God's holy presence and power. They acknowledge that all authority, and indeed all things, derive from him, belong to him, and return to him (Ro 11:36). They acknowledge his right both to redeem and to judge because he is the Creator.

The main theme of this passage is the worship of God on his throne. This is also the main theme of all Scripture. God is the only one who truly deserves worship. What is worship? Eugene Peterson defined it like this: *"Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. We worship so that we live in response to and from this center, the living God. Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives...If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose."*¹ So many people are distressed and anxious. Their life is chaotic, and without meaning and purpose. They may assume that the cause is in others, such as parents and leaders, or in the situation. But in fact, it is a failure to worship God as the center of all things. So, we must ask, "What is my life centered around?" If it is anything besides the true God, we are idol worshipers. But if we worship God our Creator, who is worthy to receive it, we can have peace. Our lives will be meaningful, dynamic, and fruitful. Let's worship God as the center of our lives, families and church.

¹ Peterson, Eugene H., *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p.60.