

**Before the Throne**  
(Sermon 11 – Rev. 4:1-11)  
12.1.24

Turn with me to Revelation, chapter 4.

One of my wife’s favorite things is to watch the leaves turn colors in the fall. We’ll be driving down the road, I’m focused on getting to where we’re going, not noticing anything except the traffic around me, and Angela will gasp. I’m ready to slam on the brakes, thinking I’m about to hit someone, and she says, “Look at those trees – how beautiful!”

And she’s right. They are beautiful. A few weeks ago, just as the leaves were in full transition, our family took a drive just to see the brilliant colors. It’s a wonderful example of the majesty and beauty of God’s creation.

Now, imagine someone who had never seen the trees change colors in the fall, and I was given the task to describe to them the beautiful colors and scenery. I could say, “We saw gold and brown and orange leaves, bright and beautiful like a painting.” But words would not fully capture what we saw.

The Apostle John was given a much harder task. Jesus pulls back the curtains of eternity, and shows John a glimpse of heaven and of the throne of God Himself. John is not only seeing things that no other earthly being has seen. But he is also given the task to write it out and describe it with words. But how do you describe what is indescribable?

In our text today, and in the coming chapters, we will be presented with strange and beautiful imagery, with descriptions and symbols that our minds will not be able to comprehend, and our imaginations will have a hard time visualizing.

But God’s purpose in these verses is not for us to fully comprehend every image, as much as it is to worship Him and be encouraged in Him.

***PROP: A fresh vision of heaven reminds us of the bigness and holiness of God, who is worthy of all our praise.***

And that’s what these verses do. They lift our gaze from focusing on the troubles and trials of earth, and remind us of the glories of heaven and the God who sits upon His throne.

And particularly today, we get our gaze lifted and our imaginations dazzled with a vision of the throne of God Almighty. Let's read Revelation 4:1-11, then we'll pray...

***[4:1] After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." [2] At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.***

***[3] And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. [4] Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.***

***[5] From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, [6] and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind:***

***[7] 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. [8] And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"***

***[9] And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, [10] the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,***

***[11] "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."***

***(Let's Pray)***

As we come to this passage, it's good to ask, why are these verses here? Why did God include this vision of heaven at this point in Revelation?

1) Revelation chapters 4 and 5 go together. They need to be studied together and understood together. Ch. 4 is the stage being set for the

drama to come in ch. 5. Chapter 4 is a vision of the throne of God, and that's where we will limit our focus today.

2) Just coming out of the 7 letters to the 7 churches, dealing with sin and trials and persecution on earth, a vision of heaven could seem out of place. But actually, in the middle of our trials and suffering, that's the perfect time to be reminded of heaven, to be reminded there is a Sovereign God ruling and reigning over all.

And here in v.1, John gives us the setting...

***[4:1] After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."***

The phrase "After this" and "what must take place after this" – these are phrases used as a transition all through Revelation. They do not necessarily mean chronological order. It just means we are about to see the next vision John is given.

And the first thing that John sees here is an open door. Remember how Jesus told the church in Philadelphia that He alone opens the door to the kingdom that no man can shut. This is a visual of that open door.

So, as John walks through this open door of heaven, and the first thing John becomes aware of is...

## **I. THE THRONE OF GOD IN HEAVEN**

***[2] At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.***

John begins by reminding us he was "in the Spirit", a state where he could see and experience spiritual things that he could not have otherwise.

And the first thing John sees through the open door into heaven is a throne. Not just any throne. THE throne. The throne of the Lord God Almighty.

***[3] And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.***

John sees the Lord God sitting upon His throne. And now, He's trying to describe what He sees with words. What a task!

And John immediately compares what he sees with precious jewels. Sparkling, shining, brilliant and beautiful.

-And the first jewel John uses in His description of the Lord is “the appearance of **jasper**”, which is typically cloudy and opaque. But later in the Book of Revelation, jasper in heaven is described as “clear as crystal” which could actually be more like a diamond. This represents the Lord's purity, righteousness and holiness.

-Then John says the Lord has the appearance of **carnelian (car-NEE-lee-un)**, a blood-red stone, which represented judgment.

-And then around the throne, John describes a rainbow with the appearance of an **emerald** (with a green tint, which represents mercy). That connects with a rainbow, as the symbol of God's covenant of mercy with His people.

Now, John may have meant for us to see the symbolism behind these jewels. OR, because John is seeing something more beautiful than anything he has ever seen, He could just be comparing the appearance of God and his throne with the greatest brilliance and sparkling beauty he had seen in the natural world – that of precious jewels.

Notice, however, that the actual face of God is not described. The appearance and brilliance of light actually masks God's image. This prevents John's readers from making graven images and worshiping them instead of God Himself. It echoes what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6...

*[15b] ...he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, [16] who alone has immortality, who dwells in **unapproachable light**, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (1 Timothy 6:15b-16)*

This unapproachable light reminds us that God is “altogether other”, completely separate from His creation, and sovereign in His power.

And then John describes something else. The majesty of God and His throne are enhanced by spectacular heavenly beings...

***[4] Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.***

We know in the Book of Revelation, numbers are symbolic. The number 24 most likely symbolizes the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 Apostles, signifying the joined completion of the OT and NT – God’s word complete, and God’s covenant people unified as one.

Now we are not sure exactly who these 24 elders are. It’s likely they are a high order of angels. We get that from descriptions later in the book:

- in chapter 5 they join with other living creatures in worshiping God.
- in chapter 7 John addresses one of the elders as “my lord” which makes more sense addressed to an angel, not a fellow Christian.
- In ch. 8, these elders offer the prayers of God’s saints to the Lord, which is what we see angels often do.

These elders, or angels have a specific function. Their function is to praise God. We will see that in just a moment.

In John’s vision, these elders surround and enhance the throne. Similar to a president or a national leader, the more important you are, the more you are surrounded by dignitaries. These are heavenly dignitaries with the purpose of glorifying God and pointing to His majestic sovereignty.

That reminder is especially timely here as we remember the original audience. John is reminding his persecuted readers, these churches Jesus just wrote to, many of them suffering under unjust governments and wicked rulers, that there is a heavenly authority above all earthly authorities. There is a sovereign throne above all other thrones and on this throne sits the King of all kings. That King is the sovereign Lord of all, and He still rules and reigns, and He will ensure justice for His people.

And through this vision of heaven, God wants to encourage each of us today – whatever injustice you’ve experienced, whatever deception or abuse from others you’ve endured, whatever authority in your life who let you down, your Heavenly Father will never let you down. He sits enthroned in majesty and power. He has no rival, and He has no equal. Take comfort

to know that He watches over His children, and nothing will happen in your life that He has not ordained for your good and His glory.

***[5] From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder,***

Not only is this another amazing visual, but John is communicating something about God that each of these descriptions point to. And in this case, it's the fearful holiness of God.

The thunder and lightning remind us of what Moses saw as he ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. When God's glory was present, the Bible describes Mt. Sinai as being surrounded by thunder and lightning and a thick cloud, and all the people trembled (Exod 19:16). Because of God's holiness, it was forbidden for anyone or anything to touch the mountain when God descended.

And the picture here in Rev. 4 of God's throne in heaven surrounded by thunder and lightning was meant to evoke that same reminder of God's untouchable, fearful holiness.

***[5b] ...and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God,***

As we've seen in previous chapters, the number 7 represents completion or perfection. So, this is most likely a reference to the Holy Spirit. And that would make sense, because the holiness of God is in view, and the fullness of God's holiness is expressed and revealed to us in the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

It's one thing to be made in God's image – which every human being is. But it's another thing to reflect God's character. That's something only Christ-followers can do – because we have the Holy Spirit living inside of us - not only to do a good work inside of us, but to reflect God's goodness and holiness through us, to be a light to others.

***[6] and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.***

John is describing what looked to him like a clear ocean around the throne, with crashing waves shimmering like crystal. Again, this is a picture of how God is separate from us, separate from creation. And the symbolism may go even deeper than that.

We know in the OT, water represents God's judgment (Pharaoh and his army swallowed up by the Red Sea, Jonah thrown overboard). That connection carries over into the NT and water baptism, symbolizing that the one who trusts in Christ has come safely through the waters of judgment and has been accepted by God.

Whatever these descriptions symbolize, we know that John is seeing a fearful, amazing sight. He does not just run up to the throne of God, but John is kept at a reverent distance.

Jesus is revealing the holiness of God to John and to John's readers to give us a glimpse into the character and nature of God, reminding us that God is holy, high and exalted, and no flesh can stand in His presence.

We can never stand before God flippantly, irreverently, in our own works, in our own righteousness. Only through the righteousness of Christ are we invited to come to the throne of grace to receive help in our time of need.

After describing for us the majesty of God on His heavenly throne, John now turns our attention to another category in this vision...

## II. THE WORSHIP OF GOD BY HEAVENLY BEINGS

***[6b] And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: [7] 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.***

These four living creatures, which are most likely the highest order of angelic beings, were orchestrating the praise of the Almighty and reflecting His transcendent glory. These beings also have symbolic meaning. Some say they represent aspects of God's character and nature:

- The lion – rep. God's sovereignty and authority
- The ox – God is strong and powerful
- The man – God's superior wisdom and intelligence over creation
- The eagle – swift, majestic – God is swift to bring his will to pass.

Others believe these four creatures specifically represent the four ways the gospels present Jesus:

- The **lion** – how the Book of Matthew presents Jesus as the King of kings.
- The **ox** was often used in temple sacrifice, and the Book of Mark presents Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins.
- The creature with the face of a **man** – connected to the Book of Luke presenting Jesus as the perfect Man.
- And the **eagle**, representing how the gospel of John portrays Jesus as the one who is High and lifted up as the Son of God.

***[8] And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within...***

What is the significance of these creatures having six wings?

We get a hint from another vision of heaven, given to the OT prophet Isaiah, who describes similar angelic beings. “Seraphim”, or high-ranking angelic beings, also had 6 wings.

They used 2 to cover their face, having no right to gaze upon a holy God. Two wings were used to cover their feet as a sign of humility. And with 2 wings they flew, ready to do the Lord’s will.

John says these four creatures had eyes all around, representing the all-seeing, all-knowing omniscience of God Himself.

But more than all the symbolism of these creatures, is what these creatures were doing. They were all gathered around the throne worshiping God Almighty. That’s the main activity going on in heaven right now – worship. Which should encourage us that when we gather together and worship God on a Sunday, we are reflecting on earth what is going on in Heaven. The gathering matters. The gathering of God’s people, to worship God in song, to worship God in His word, is a dress rehearsal for that One Day, when we will all gather and worship God around His throne for all eternity.

John says that these heavenly beings...

***[8b] ...and day and night they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”***

God is three times holy. Each pronouncement of God’s holiness announcing and affirming the complete and perfect holiness of the Almighty, meaning He is altogether “other”, He is set apart, He is without fault, without sin, and without equal. He is good and He does good.



The only other place in Scripture with that 3-time pronouncement, echoing again the prophet Isaiah...*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:3)*

But why is God’s holiness pronounced 3 times? The late R. C. Sproul helpfully reminds us of this. He writes...

*“Only once in sacred Scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree. Only once is a characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, or wrath, wrath, wrath, or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy; the whole earth is full of His glory.”*

**- R. C. Sproul**

And this worship of God in heaven was too wonderful to be contained to only four creatures. John tells us of the other heavenly beings joining in...

***[9] And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, [10] the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, [11] “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 these four living creatures orchestrate the worship of God, day and night, never stopping, the 24 elders also fall down and worship. And they lay down their crowns before the throne, showing that God alone deserves all the glory.

The four living creatures exalted God’s holiness. The 24 elders sing of God’s worthiness - which reminds us, the essence of worship is to ascribe worth – to declare the worth-ship of God. The act of worship is not rooted in us, but in God Himself.

While it’s true that we should feel and use emotion in our worship, these verses remind us worship is not ultimately in what we feel about God. Worship is rooted in what is true about God – His character and nature, who He is and what He’s done. Worship is all of creation reverently communicating a collective “amen” to God’s holiness and worth.

Look at v. 11 again...

***[11] “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.”***

This is a doxology – a spontaneous praise – from of all of creation, affirming and celebrating that God is worthy of our worship. He is worthy because He willed all of the created order into being. And the reason He created us is to know Him, to worship Him, to find our joy in Him and to glorify Him – in this life and in the life to come.

### **CONCLUSION / REMINDER**

***A fresh vision of heaven reminds us of the bigness and holiness of God, who is worthy of all our praise.***

I believe God desires that for John, for John’s original audience back then, and for us today. Jesus pulled back the curtain of heaven to give us this glimpse of His majesty and His glory, to affect us right now:

- Seeing the worship going on in heaven changes how we worship here on earth. Intimate knowledge of God leads to intimate worship of God. In these verses, God has revealed to us amazing glimpses of His glory, of His holiness, of His sovereignty – not only that we would know what worship is like in heaven, but so that we will reflect that worship right here on the earth.

- Seeing the eternal worship of God in heaven reminds us that He has not changed. He will not change. No matter what we go through, no matter what we face, God never changes. He WAS worthy. He IS worthy. He ALWAYS WILL BE worthy. May that be reflected in our songs of worship, in hearts of worship, and in lives of worship.

- This glimpse of heaven also helps to re-focus and re-anchor our hope, to remember – in our most difficult times – that there is a sovereign God who is still on His throne.

The world shifts and shakes. But our God remains steady. He remains holy. He remains worthy. And He...is...in...control.

One day, we will see for ourselves the amazing sights and sounds that John saw. One day, we will join these heavenly beings around the throne.

We will join in their songs and worship our Lord together.

But we will also sing a song that the angels cannot sing. We will sing the song of the Redeemed. For those who know what it is to have been saved from our sin by the mercy and grace of God, for those who know what it is to be washed in the blood of the Savior, to be adopted as sons and daughters of God, we will sing of the love of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, who died for us, raised from the dead defeating death for us, and has promised us eternity with Him.

We long for His return. May it be soon. But until then, may our praises echo those of heaven, that our God is sovereign. And He is holy. And He is worthy of all our praise.

***(Let's Pray)***