

Revelation Chapter 4

Revelation 4 (NKJV)

¹ After these things I looked, and behold, a door *standing* open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard *was* like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, “Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this.”

² Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne.

³ And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and *there was* a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.

⁴ Around the throne *were* twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.

⁵ And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire *were* burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

⁶ Before the throne *there was* a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, *were* four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.

⁷ The first living creature *was* like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature *was* like a flying eagle.

⁸ The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!”

⁹ Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever,

¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

¹¹ “You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created.”

Just as the book of Revelation opens with a reference to the throne of God, and the letter to the last of the seven churches closes with a reference to the throne of Christ, so here the first great prophetic vision begins with the statement, **there was a throne set in heaven** (see Dan 7:9). A **throne** is the symbol of government and power. John attempts to record a vision of God similar to that beheld by Moses (Ex 19:9, 19), by Isaiah (6:5), and by Ezekiel (1:26-28).¹

The **voice** that invites John to heaven is the voice of Christ (cf. vv. 1–2). Many Bible students believe that John’s entrance into heaven is a picture of the church’s being taken home to be with

¹Pfeiffer, Charles F. ; Harrison, Everett Falconer: *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary : New Testament*. Chicago : Moody Press, 1962, S. Re 4:1

the Lord at this time (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:51–53). The Lord Jesus promises to **show John things which must take place after this**. These words are similar to the last part of 1:19 and support the use of that verse as an outline of the book.²

True spiritual worship is perhaps one of the greatest needs in our individual lives and in our churches. There is a constant emphasis today on witnessing for Christ and working for Christ, but not enough is said about worshiping Him. To *worship* means “to ascribe worth” (see Rev. 4:11; 5:12). It means to use all that we are and have to praise God for all that He is and does.

Heaven is a place of worship, and God’s people shall worship Him throughout all eternity. Perhaps it would be good for us to get in practice now! A study of Revelation 4–5 will certainly help us better understand how to worship God and give Him the glory that He deserves.

If Revelation 1:19 is God’s inspired outline of this book, then Revelation 4 ushers us into the third division: “the things which shall be hereafter.” In fact, that is exactly what God said to John when He summoned him to heaven! It would appear that, in this experience, John illustrates what will happen to God’s people when the Church Age has run its course: heaven will open; there will be a voice and the sound of a trumpet; and the saints will be caught up to heaven (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thes. 4:13–18). Then, God’s judgment of the earth can begin.

But before God pours out His wrath, He gives us a glimpse into glory and permits us to hear the worshiping creatures in heaven as they praise God. Two aspects of their worship are presented for our instruction and imitation.

They Worship the Creator (Rev. 4)

The key word in this chapter is *throne*; it is used fourteen times. In fact, this is a key word in the entire book, appearing forty-six times. No matter what may happen on earth, God is on His throne and is in complete control. Various teachers interpret Revelation in different ways, but all agree that John is emphasizing the glory and sovereignty of God. What an encouragement that would be to the suffering saints of John’s day and of every age in history.

Using the throne as the focal point, we can easily understand the arrangement of this exciting chapter.

On the throne—Almighty God (vv. 2–3a).

||² Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne.

||³ And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance;

This is God the Father, since the Son approaches the throne in Revelation 5:6, and the Spirit is pictured before the throne in Revelation 4:5. There is no possible way for human words to

²MacDonald, William ; Farstad, Arthur: *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995, S. Re 4:1

describe what God is like in His essence. John can only use comparisons. Jasper is a clear gem (see Rev. 21:11) and the sardius is red. The Lord is robed in light, according to Psalm 104:2 and 1 Timothy 6:16. Both the jasper and the sardius (sardine) were found in the breastplate of the high priest (Ex. 28:17–21).

In the high priest's breastplate, the jasper represented Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and the sardius represented Benjamin, his lastborn. The name Reuben means "Behold, a son," and Benjamin means "son of my right hand." Walvoord sees the two stones as including all the other stones, depicting all of God's people, and the Person on the throne as God in relation to the people of Israel.³

This jasper (cf. 21:18) is a clear stone in contrast to the opaque jasper stones known today; it may have resembled a diamond. The carnelian, also known as ruby (the NIV trans. it "ruby" in the OT), and sardius, were a ruby-red color. The jasper and the carnelian were the first and last of the 12 gemstones worn on the high priest's breast (cf. Ex. 28:17-21). Jasper and sardius were used in relation to the king of Tyre (Ezek. 28:13) and will be in the foundation of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:19-20).⁴

Around the throne—a rainbow (v. 3b).

||³ ... *there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.*

Notice that the rainbow was around the throne in other words, this rainbow was a complete circle, not merely an arc, for in heaven all things are completed. The rainbow reminds us of God's covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:11–17), symbolic of His promise that He would never again destroy the earth with a flood. God's covenant, as we shall see, was not only with Noah, but with all of His creation.

Judgment is about to fall, but the rainbow reminds us that God is merciful, even when He judges (Hab. 3:2). Usually, a rainbow appears *after* the storm; but here, we see it *before* the storm.

The rainbow, apparently a ring of green light like an emerald, is a pledge that God will keep His covenants, in spite of the coming judgments.

³MacDonald, William ; Farstad, Arthur: *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995, S. Re 4:2

cf. *confer*, compare

trans. translation, translator, translated

OT Old Testament

⁴Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:943

Around the throne—elders and living creatures (vv. 3–4, 6–7).

³ And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and *there was* a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.

⁴ Around the throne *were* twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.

⁶ Before the throne *there was* a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, *were* four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.

⁷ The first living creature *was* like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature *was* like a flying eagle.

The rainbow was around the throne vertically, while these heavenly beings were around the throne horizontally. They are, as it were, the king's court.

Who are these twenty-four elders seated on thrones? It is unlikely that they are angels, because angels are not numbered (Heb. 12:22), crowned, or enthroned. Besides, in Revelation 7:11, the elders are distinguished from the angels (see also Rev. 5:8–11). The crowns they wear are the “victor's crowns” (the Greek word *stephanos*; see Rev. 2:10); and we have no evidence that angels receive rewards.

The identity of the 24 elders can be established from a careful observation of the descriptive data. They are clothed in white, indicating purity; seated on thrones, suggesting responsibility and status; crowned with victors' wreaths (*stephanous*, Gk.); and they themselves bear witness that they have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and, therefore, constitute a kingdom of priests (5:10, see note in center column). Such a description can only represent redeemed humanity. Twenty-four is twice twelve. In the picturesque vision of the New Jerusalem in ch. 21, the city is said to have twelve pearl gates, inscribed with the names of the twelve sons of Jacob, and twelve foundations, inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles. A similar truth is presented in the number of elders. Both O.T. and N.T. saints are gathered as the family of God in heaven and are here represented in the 24 elders.⁵

These elders probably symbolize the people of God in heaven, enthroned and rewarded. There were twenty-four courses of priests in the Old Testament temple (1 Chron. 24:3–5, 18; see also Luke 1:5–9). God's people are “kings and priests” (Rev. 1:6), reigning and serving with Christ. Note especially their praise (Rev. 5:9–10). When Daniel (Dan. 7:9) saw the thrones set up (not “cast down” as in the *King James Version*), they were empty; but when John saw them, they had been filled. Since there were twelve tribes of Israel and twelve Apostles, perhaps the number twenty-four symbolizes the completion of God's people.

⁵ *Believer's Study Bible*. electronic ed. Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995, S. Re 4:4

The white robes and palm branches speak of victory (see Rev. 7:9). These are the “overcomers” who have conquered because of their faith in Christ (1 John 5:4–5).

Also around the throne, John saw four “living creatures” (“beasts” in the *King James Version*) who were nearer to God than the angels and the elders. They resemble the cherubim that the Prophet Ezekiel saw (Ezek. 1:4–14; 10:20–22), but their praise (Rev. 4:8) reminds us of the seraphim of Isaiah 6. I believe that these special creatures symbolize God’s creation and are related to God’s covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8–17). The faces of the living creatures parallel God’s statement in Genesis 9:10—His covenant is with Noah (the face of the man), the fowl (the face of the eagle), the cattle (the face of the calf), and the beasts of the earth (the face of the lion).

These creatures signify the wisdom of God (“full of eyes”) and proclaim the holiness of God. They are heavenly reminders that God has a covenant with His creation and that He rules His creation from His throne. The presence of the emerald rainbow further enhances this image, since the rainbow was given as the sign of the creation covenant. No matter what terrible judgments may fall on God’s earth, He will be faithful to keep His Word. Men may curse Him during the judgments (Rev. 16:9, 11, 21), but nature will praise Him and magnify His holiness.

The cherubim described in Ezekiel 1 seem to have a part in the providential workings of God in the world, pictured by the “wheels within the wheels.” God uses the forces of nature to accomplish His will (Ps. 148), and all nature praises and thanks Him.

Some students see in the four faces described (Rev. 4:7) an illustration of the fourfold picture of Christ given in the Gospel accounts. Matthew is the royal Gospel of the King, illustrated by the lion. Mark emphasizes the servant aspect of the Lord’s ministry (the calf). Luke presents Christ as the compassionate Son of man. John magnifies the deity of Christ, the Son of God (the eagle).

Finally, the name used by these creatures, “Lord God Almighty,” emphasizes the power of God. As mentioned in chapter 1, the name *Almighty* is used nine times in Revelation. The only other such usage in the New Testament is 2 Corinthians 6:18, but it is found at least thirty-one times in Job, a book that magnifies the power of God in nature.

Out of the throne—storm signals (v. 5a).

||⁵ And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

These are indications of a coming storm and reminders of God’s awesome power (see Ex. 9:23, 28; 19:16). These “storm signals” will be repeated during the time of judgment, always proceeding from the throne and temple of God (Rev. 8:5; 11:19; 16:18). God has indeed prepared His throne for judgment (Ps. 9:7; note also 77:18).

Our world does not like to think of God as a God of judgment. They prefer to look at the rainbow around the throne and ignore the lightning and thunder out of the throne. He certainly is a God of

grace, but His grace reigns *through righteousness* (Rom. 5:21). This was made clear at the cross where God manifested both His love for sinners and His wrath against sin.

Before the throne—lamps and a sea (vv. 5b-6a).

- 5 ... Seven lamps of fire *were* burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.
- 6 Before the throne *there was* a sea of glass, like crystal...

The seven lamps signify completeness and symbolize the Holy Spirit of God (Rev. 1:4; note also Ezek. 1:13). John also seems to suggest in Revelation that the “heavenly sanctuary” follows the pattern of the earthly tabernacle and temple (see Heb. 9:23). The parallels are as follows:

<i>Earthly temple</i>	<i>Heavenly sanctuary</i>
Holy of holies	The throne of God
Seven-branched candlestick	Seven lamps of fire before the throne
Bronze laver	Sea of glass
Cherubin over the mercy seat	Four living creatures around the throne
Priests	Elders (kings and priests)
Brazen altar	Altar (Rev. 6:9–11)
Incense altar	Incense Altar (Rev. 8:3–5)
Ark of the covenant	Ark of the covenant (Rev. 11:19)

There is no temple in heaven in a material sense. All of heaven is God’s sanctuary for those who serve before His holy throne (Rev. 7:15). However, John indicates in Revelation 15:5–8 that there is a special “sanctuary” of God (note also Rev. 11:19). In the eternal state, there will be no temple (Rev. 21:22).

A pure crystal sea symbolizes God’s holiness, and the mingled fire speaks of His holy judgment. The crystal “firmament” in Ezekiel’s vision also comes to mind (Ezek. 1:22); it was the foundation for God’s throne. We shall meet this “sea of glass” again in Revelation 15 where it is connected with Israel’s victory over Egypt.

⁶...And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, *were* four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.

⁷The first living creature *was* like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature *was* like a flying eagle.

⁸The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!”

The four living creatures are strikingly similar to the cherubim (angels) Ezekiel saw close to God’s throne (see Ezek. 10:1–20). Full of eyes means that these creatures see everything.

The lion, calf, man, and eagle have been understood as referring to the four Gospels with their distinctive portrayals of Christ. However, the description recalls the four cherubim in Ezek. 1:4–10, and thus the four figures probably represent four different angels (see Ezek. 10). These living creatures or angels seem to be associated with creation and its ultimate redemption.⁶

Many interpretations have been given of the four living creatures. As the Holy Spirit was seen symbolically in the seven lamps, probably the four living creatures symbolically represent the attributes of God including His omniscience and omnipresence (indicated by the creatures being full of eyes)—with the four animals bringing out other attributes of God: the lion indicating majesty and omnipotence; the ox, typical of faithful labor and patience; man, indicating intelligence; and the eagle, the greatest bird, representing supreme sovereignty. Another possible view is that they represent Christ as revealed in the four Gospels: in Matthew, the lion of the tribe of Judah; in Mark, the ox as the servant of Yahweh; in Luke, the incarnate human Jesus; and in John, the eagle as the divine Son of God. Another alternative is that the four living creatures are angels (cf. Isa. 6:2-3), who extol the attributes of God.⁷

⁶Radmacher, Earl D. ; Allen, Ronald Barclay ; House, H. Wayne: *The Nelson Study Bible : New King James Version*. Nashville : T. Nelson Publishers, 1997, S. Re 4:6

cf. *confer*, compare

⁷Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:944

Praise to the throne (vv. 9–11).

⁹ Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever,

¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

¹¹ “You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created.”

Whenever the living creatures glorified God, the elders would fall before the throne and praise Him. The Book of Revelation is filled with hymns of praise (Rev. 4:8, 11; 5:9–13; 7:12–17; 11:15–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 18:2–8; 19:2–6). The emphasis on praise is significant when you remember that John wrote this book to encourage people who were going through suffering and persecution!

The theme of this hymn is *God the Creator*, while in Revelation 5 the elders praise *God the Redeemer*. The praise in Revelation 4 is given to the Father on the throne, while in Revelation 5 it is directed to the Son (the Lamb) before the throne. The closing hymn (Rev. 5:13) is expressed to both, another proof of the deity of Jesus Christ.

If the twenty-four elders typify the people of God in heaven, then we must ask, “Why should God’s people praise God the Creator?” If the heavens are declaring the glory of God, why shouldn’t God’s heavenly people join the chorus? Creation bears constant witness to the power, wisdom, and glory of God (Ps. 19). Acknowledging the Creator is the first step toward trusting the Redeemer (see Acts 14:8–18; 17:22–31). “All things were created by Him [Christ] and for Him... and by Him all things consist [hold together]” (Col. 1:16–17).

But sinful man worships and serves the creature rather than the Creator, and this is idolatry (Rom. 1:25). Furthermore, sinful man has polluted and destroyed God’s wonderful creation; and he is going to pay for it (see Rev. 11:18). Creation is for God’s praise and pleasure, and man has no right to usurp that which rightfully belongs to God. Man plunged creation into sin, so that God’s *good* creation (Gen. 1:31) is today a *groaning* creation (Rom. 8:22); but because of Christ’s work on the cross, it will one day be delivered and become a *glorious* creation (Rom. 8:18–24).

It is unfortunate that the church today often neglects to worship the God of creation. The real answer to the ecological problem is not financial or legal, but spiritual. It is only when man acknowledges the Creator and begins to use creation to God’s glory that the problems will be solved.

A door (1). God will one day open the door, the trumpet will sound, and God’s people will be called to heaven (1 Thess. 4:13–18). Meanwhile, we must take advantage of the open door of service that He gives us (3:8).

A throne (2, 4–5). Revelation is the book of the throne. John saw God the Father on the throne and was so overwhelmed that he had to refer to precious stones to describe what he beheld. Satan may have his throne on earth (2:13), but God’s throne in heaven rules over all and will not be defeated.

A rainbow (3). This emerald rainbow was *around* the throne, a complete circle and not just an arc. It pictures the grace of God (Gen. 9:11–17). On earth, we see the rainbow *after* the storm; but John saw it *before* the storm of judgment came. God gives His people His gracious promise, and they need not fear the coming storm (3:10; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:8).

A choir (6–11). The living creatures represent creation praising the Creator (Gen. 1:28–31), and the elders represent God’s people worshiping Him. When you lose the wonder of the Creator, you cease to become a good steward of the creation (11:18). All of creation praises the Lord while sinful man praises himself and ignores his Creator.