

## **“THE THRONE IN HEAVEN.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Scripture Texts: Revelation 4:1-11**

### **Introduction**

In my first sermon on Revelation I imagined if Revelation were an ocean then the first three chapters would be like wading in up to your waist. But at chapter four all of a sudden we are over our head and sinking fast. There is depth beyond fathoming from here on.

With this major scene change let's remember where we are.

It's the Lord's Day about 60 years after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. The beloved disciple of the Lord is exiled on the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. From its shores he could see the hills of Asia Minor in the distance, the region of the seven churches.

Those seven churches are under persecution from Satan and under great temptation to sin. The blood of martyrs is flowing, the tyranny of idolatrous Caesars holding sway, demanding worship be given to them. Internal sin was leading the church away from her first love.

After all we have heard about the churches, our Lord gives to all churches in all ages a great gift of courage and encouragement, a blessing from heaven.

**Revelation 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.***”

What must take place after this refers to the rest of Revelation 4:1 – 22:5. We come to a major break in the outline of Revelation. We have covered the past and the present and now are looking toward the future, to what must yet take place.

The scene shifts from earth to heaven, from God's footstool to God's throne. This lays the foundation for all the rest of the vision of Revelation. From this vantage point John will see all that must take place in heaven and on earth.

### **The Throne of Heaven.**

***First, John saw into heaven.***

A door is opened and a voice calls him up. It is the voice of Christ for it is only through Christ that anyone has access to heaven.

In Scripture there are three heavens, the realm of birds and airplanes, the realm spaceships, stars and galaxies, and the realm of God. This is the heavenly places, the realm of spiritual reality, the

realm of God. We are coming as close here as is humanly possible to seeing into heaven, into the throne room of God.

John is in the spirit, not bodily lifted up. It is as if he is carried away in some kind of higher ecstatic state, like Paul in II Corinthians 12.

Remember this is a *vision*, not a photograph. This scene in heaven is not necessarily as it really will be when we get there. What he sees and hears are not literal or material but symbols.

Symbols are more about conveying meaning than they are about conveying physical appearance. Everything described is meant to express spiritual truth. This opening vision is a highly symbolical vision of all the most important elements of the spiritual kingdom of God.

May God give us eyes to see, ears to hear, minds to understand, hearts to believe. May He make our hearts stirred and responsive.

*Second, he saw a throne and its occupant.*

**Revelation 4:2-3** 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.

There is one central truth being communicated in chapters 4 and 5. At the center of the universe there is an object and an activity. At the center of the universe there is a throne occupied by the living God from which He governs the universe.

All that is created will worship the Creator God. The universe exists to glorify God and worship God. This supreme purpose is summed up by the Psalmist:

**Psalm 99:1, 5** The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble!  
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!  
5 Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he!

*Behold a throne.* The very first thing that captures John attention is the throne. This is the center point of the vision. This dominates and controls everything else. The throne appears seventeen times in chapters 4 and 5 and forty-five times in Revelation, in all but five of the twenty-two chapters. The throne is about authority. God is the spiritual center and power of the universe. Everything radiates out from Him.

*Someone occupies the throne in heaven.* And His splendor far surpasses the splendor of any earthly king, in fact His splendor far surpasses the splendor of all earthly kings combined.

John doesn't describe God, God cannot be described, He is above description. He is hidden behind the blaze of His own glory, glories hinted at by the brilliant colors of jewels.

What is the meaning of the jasper, carnelian and emerald? What do precious jewels do? They gather in light and intensify the color hidden in light. Light is full of colors our eyes unaided are too dull to see. Each stone draws out certain brilliant colors. Glory is enhanced.

These *precious jewels* speak of God's unsurpassed wealth, beauty, splendor and glory. They speak of His attributes, His holiness, His justice.

The *rainbow* takes us back to marvelous manifestations of God and His promise at the flood. It's the symbol of God's covenant toward a fallen world. God has graciously bound Himself by a covenant of love, mercy, grace and redemption. At the throne we find mercy and grace.

The *thunder and lightning* take us back to the revelation of God on Mt. Sinai. This is the awe-ful voice of God, the wrath poured out against all His opposition, mingled with the comforting assurances of His love to all who trust and obey.

The *seven lamps of the seven spirits* are the Holy Spirit, filling the earth with the light of God's truth. All who walk by the Spirit walk in light and not in darkness.

The *sea of glass like crystal* is a symbol of the great bronze basin, one of the most impressive things in the temple. It was for daily ritual washing and cleansing in God's temple. This reminds us of the necessity of being holy even as He is holy.

This is the gospel and the purifying/sanctifying power of the Spirit in the waters of baptism.

As all creation is gathered before the throne for worship, we are reminded that it is not universal or indiscriminate. The people of God went to Mt. Sinai through the waters of the Red Sea. The people of God entered the Promised Land through the waters of the Jordan River. The people of God enter into the covenant family through the waters of baptism. Only those can enter who have repented and been baptized, who have confessed their sin and been cleansed from it.

### **Those around the throne.**

John sees *twenty-four thrones with twenty-four elders* and *four living creatures*.

There are two ways we use numbers. One is as facts as in math or counting or statistics. There are 57 organ pipes behind me. The other is symbolic. They stand for something other than facts and counting. These numbers have great symbolic and spiritual importance otherwise the Spirit would not have included them and Jesus would not have revealed them.

### ***Twenty four elders.***

The number 24 is very rare in Scripture but the number twelve is very common and two twelves are linked in:

**Revelation 21:12-14** It had a great, high wall, with *twelve gates*, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the *twelve tribes of the sons of Israel* were inscribed— 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14

And the wall of the city had *twelve foundations*, and on them were the twelve names of the *twelve apostles of the Lamb*.

The twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles taken together represent the whole church of God, from the OT and the NT. These elders represent the true, chosen, covenant people of God, all of redeemed humanity.

With their white robes of holiness and golden crowns of victory, they are our representatives, wearing our priestly garments and bearing our royal crowns. As Jesus said to the saints in Sardis, don't defile your garments. As Jesus said to the saints in Philadelphia, hold fast that no one take your crown.

Such is our place in the kingdom of God. Such will be our nearness to God. Consider the glorious blessings and privileges awaiting those who enter into the covenant of God.

*Four living creatures*, each with six wings, a lion, an ox, a human, an eagle.

This is perhaps the strangest and most remarkable mystery in this vision. This is the most unearthly of all the sights and sounds. We know of nothing like this.

Four is generally interpreted as symbolic of the earth or of earthly things; the four corners of the earth, the four winds, the four points of the compass.

**Revelation 7:1** After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth.

Four living creatures were seen in Ezekiel and the six wings in Isaiah 6.

**Ezekiel 10:20-21** These were the living creatures ... and I knew that they were cherubim. 21 Each had four faces, and each four wings.

These are not cute little chubby cherubs but awesome creatures associated with the presence of God Himself. The question is what do they represent, what are they symbolic of?

Most interpreters think they represent all of creation worshiping God, each one the highest example or the leading representatives of the four classes of animal creation.

The lion is the king of the wild animal kingdom, representing courage, strength and power. The ox is from the domesticated animal realm, representing patience, submission and service. The eagle soars above all the aviary realm representing swiftness and majesty. The man represents the highest order of creation with his intelligence, reason, and benevolence.

Before us are sinlessly perfect creatures, never polluted by sin and rebellion and selfishness, complete free of all that hinders and weighs us down. This is a picture of the spiritual life as it was meant to be, at its essence.

They are different from the twenty four elders, yet in harmony and unity with them (see 5:8-9). As the twenty four represent the covenant people of God, the whole church of the redeemed, so the four living creatures represent redeemed creation, in the fullness of power and glory, six wings, full of eyes to see perfectly and completely.

One day we shall be before God and love Him with a pure unpolluted love and know Him with perfect knowledge and intelligence and serve Him with ceaseless energy. We will mount up with the wings of eagles and soar.

### **The worship around the throne.**

The throne is the central object, worship is the central activity. God is gathering His people for worship. The old Israel and the new church, all of creation.

“All creatures of my God and king, lift up your voice and sing.”

God is thrice holy, holy to the superlative degree. The four living creatures echo the song of praise heard from the seraphim in Isaiah, and expand it describing God’s lordship and rule and authority over all eternity, past, present and future.

The twenty four elders join and show their submission, obedience and reverence.

I know that one of the things about heaven that we have a hard time getting our heads around is this idea of constant, ceaseless worship.

I remember my high school math teacher mocking heaven as this mind-numbingly boring place of white robes, playing harps and singing to some egotistical God.

Our hearts are still so stained by sin that we can’t conceive of the bliss of pure worship. This worship depicted in this vision is only possible with a new heart, a heart redeemed and made new by the Holy Spirit.

People who don’t worship God, don’t have a center, don’t have a focus, a focal point, don’t have a way of getting perspective for the rest of life.

The worship of God is the highest and best and most spiritual act a creature of God is capable of but it is only possible by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Without the work of the Holy Spirit we have no capacity whatsoever to find joy in worship.

“These people cry out in praise because they are continually discovering new, exciting, awesome aspects of God's wisdom and power breaking afresh upon them. So they are constantly driven to praise God for who he is. That is what true worship ought to be” (Ray Stedman).

### **Application and conclusion.**

Let’s be as clear as we can be about one thing, over all the earth and over all the universe there is a great throne and on that throne is a great God. Whatever happens in our life time or in the life

span of this earth, remember, over it all is a throne. This universe has a creator and a ruler and He is on the throne. He cannot be dethroned.

In the midst of every fiery trial, in the midst of every trouble and tribulation, in the midst of temptations, afflictions, persecutions, war, famine and death, God is on His throne, He rules and reigns over all.

His power assures us of final victory.

His justice guarantees vindication of all that is right.

His goodness and magnificence guarantee blessing and comfort.

The blood sacrifice of His Son accomplishes our salvation.

No matter what happens or what we face God is in control and He rules over all.

Oh the folly of living only for this world, for earthly and material things. What a fearful and fatal and tragic mistake it is to ignore the reality and glory of the kingdom of God. What folly when the creature shuts out his Creator. What horror will fill every soul on judgment day that despised or rejected or ignored what is unseen and eternal. Oh the folly of walking by sight and not by faith, by trust things that are seen more than in things that are unseen.

Take this vision to heart and meditate on this, store these things up in your heart and ponder them. Ponder these strange sights, ponder these unseen spiritual realities that they might surpass all the glories of earthly things in our minds and hearts.

What a flood of images in this vision of the throne room of heaven. It is meant to make us reel at the beauty and glory and splendor, a scene beyond what any earth-bound human can fathom.

Behold the throne of heaven, the throne of the living God whose glory outshines the sun and reveals His perfect attributes, over arched with the great rainbow of the covenant, surrounded by redeemed sinners in their pure, priestly robes and crowns of glory, hearing the mighty thunderings and lightnings of the voice of God yet dwelling secure in His love; bathed in the light of the truth revealed by the seven-fold Spirit of God, and all of this reflected brilliantly in a vast sea of glass like crystal.

**Ephesians 1:3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

**Ephesians 2:6-7** [who has] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

**I Corinthians 2:9-10** as it is written,  
“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined,  
what God has prepared for those who love him”—  
10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.