

CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4 pictures John being caught up into heaven. There he is shown things that are to happen in future times, which refers to this present Christian dispensation. (See v:1)

Some symbols in chapter 4 seem to almost defy explanation., but the overall meaning of this chapter is relatively clear: God is sitting on his throne, possessing all power, and is worthy of all glory and honor. He is in control of all things.

The following is a brief description of the overall throne scene of chapter 4. God is sitting on his magnificent throne in heaven, which is encompassed by an emerald (green) rainbow. Seated around this throne are twenty-four elders dressed in white raiment with crowns of gold on their heads. In front of the throne are seven lamps of fire and sea of glass. In the midst of the throne and round about it are four living creatures with six wings and full of eyes. These living creatures continually worship God, and the twenty-four elders cast their crowns before God's throne as they also worship him. In this vision, God is the center of all things, and all worship is directed to him.

The people of John's day were suffering terrible persecution originating from the Roman throne. This vision assured the first-century Christians, as well as assuring us today, that God is sitting on his throne in heaven and is in complete control of all things. No matter how many persecutions, hardships, trials we may have here on earth, and regardless of the source of these hardships, we must remember that God is the ultimate ruler. Although many powers on earth bring hardships to Christians, they are only temporary. God's power is complete and eternal.

As chapter 4 is studied, it is extremely important to understand that this is a description of God's throne as it exists today! We do not have to wait until we reach heaven for God to be in control of all things. He is in control of all things today, and we as Christians are symbolically standing before his throne today as we worship him in his church (7:15).

THE THRONE OF GOD

Verse 1. 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.

As this vision begins, John sees a door opened in heaven. If this door has a symbolic meaning, it shows that the door to heaven is always open to those who are willing to obey God's will. "After this," also translated "after these things" (ASV), refers to the visions and letters of chapters 1 through 3. Therefore, the "hereafter" refers to time still in the future to John. It is this present Christian dispensation which will extend to Christ's second coming.

Some would have us believe that the visions which are to follow in Revelation take place during a period of time after a so-called rapture in which the church will be secretly taken from this earth, and those who remain will go through a period of great tribulation. They believe that after this period of great tribulation, Christ will then return to earth to set up an earthly kingdom and reign for one thousand years. This would render Revelation meaningless to Christians today. Those who believe this theory make the same mistake as the Jews did in the time of Christ. They asked, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They were looking for an earthly kingdom, but God gave Christians a spiritual kingdom--- the church. (For more information see comments on chapter 20.)

The voice John heard is generally accepted to be Christ's, although this cannot absolutely be proven. In 1:10, John heard "a great voice, as of a trumpet." This was definitely Christ's because in 1:18, he said, "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore." Since Christ's voice was described in 1:10 as being like a trumpet, it is possible that the voice in this verse was also Christ's.

Verse 2. And immediately I was in the spirit; and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.

John was taken up to the spiritual realm to view the things God would reveal to him. The first vision he saw was God sitting on his heavenly throne. We know this was God sitting on the throne because verse 8 states that those who were giving praise were directing it to the Lord God Almighty.

A throne is always recognized as being symbolic of the great power and authority of a king. God's throne is set in heaven indicating his total power and authority. No earthly throne can come close to matching the power of this heavenly throne. God's throne has already been set. It exists today as described in chapter 4, and we must put our trust in this throne rather than some earthly throne.

Verse 3. 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.

This is a description of God and his throne using symbolic language. We are told that looking at God was like looking at a jasper stone and a sardius. Phillips translates the jasper as a diamond, others say it should be opal. The sardius, which was sometimes called carnelian, is thought by some to be a variety of agate which was used extensively by engravers; others say it was red jasper. Probably no significance should be attached to these stones other than their beauty and value. It could be possible that the color of these stones is significant, since the color of the rainbow around the throne helps define its meaning. But since we are not positive what type of stones these are, we cannot make such an application.

Since we are not given any specific definition of the rainbow, we must look to the Old Testament to determine its symbolic meaning. The only account of a rainbow being used as a symbol in the Old Testament is in Gen. 9:8-17. Just after God had destroyed the earth with water, he made a covenant with Noah promising him that the earth would never again be destroyed in that manner. To remind people of all ages of this promise, God placed a rainbow in the clouds. Gen. 9:13 states, "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth." The rainbow is a token of the covenant God made with Noah. If we apply this meaning to the rainbow around the throne, this rainbow would also be a token of a covenant that God made with his people. The final covenant that God made with his people is the law of Christ or the New Testament. Therefore, this rainbow around the throne of God should remind all men that he has made a covenant with us, and its reward is everlasting life if we are obedient to it. The covenant God made with Noah has never been broken; neither will this covenant he has made with Christians. The emerald rainbow is our token!

This rainbow is described as looking like an emerald. There are at least two probable reasons for this. First, this would signify the tremendous value of God's covenant with man. Second, since an emerald is green, this rainbow would appear green. The color green is used in 9:4 to describe those people who have spiritual life. This symbolism was taken from nature. Almost any plant that is alive and growing must be green because the green coloring substance, chlorophyll is necessary for a plant to sustain its physical life. If we adapt this to our spiritual life, green would be the color of those who are living and growing spiritually as in 9:4. This enables us to conclude that the rainbow is green because it is a token to remind us of the spiritual life-giving covenant that God made with man.

Verse 4. 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.

Circled around God's throne were twenty-four thrones with twenty-four elders seated on them. They were clothed in white with crowns of gold on their heads. The first question that must be answered is this: Who are these twenty-four elders? To determine this we must rely on the symbolic number "12" which is used to represent organized religion. God has made two covenants with man---the law of Moses and the law of Christ. The law of Moses was represented by the twelve children of Israel, and the law of Christ is represented by the twelve apostles. If we

take “12,” the number of organized religion, and double it for the two covenants, the result is “24.” These twenty-four elders represent the lawgivers of the Old Testament and New Testament.

Later, in verse 10, these elders worship God just as the four living creatures do in verse 8. This shows that these two laws came directly from God. He gave the laws to mankind through a certain chosen few. The law of Moses was given directly to the twelve tribes of Israel, but the law of Christ was given to all mankind through the twelve apostles. When Christ came, he fulfilled the old law and established the new. The law that Christ gave is the method whereby mankind can be spiritually acceptable to God. These twenty-four elders represent these spiritual laws.

Man is a spiritual being by nature. Throughout history he has proven this by worshiping all forms of gods. God is showing us here that the one true form of spiritual worship must be according to the laws he has set up. If mankind is to be acceptable to God, all of his spiritual worship must be in accordance with the law God has given through his chosen lawgivers, and it must be directed to the one and only true God.

The twenty-four elders are dressed in white, indicating purity or cleanliness. In 3:4, 5, we are told that Christians are the ones who are worthy to be clothed in white. Our obedience to the law of God makes us worthy to be clothed in white. (See 3:18.) If we are to be pure or cleansed from our sin in the sight of God, we must put on these white garments. These twenty-four elders are dressed in white because they gave mankind the law, which will allow us to clothe ourselves in white. When we obey that law, we are spiritually cleansed, and we wear the spiritual white garments of righteousness.

These twenty-four elders also had crowns of gold upon their heads. Crowns are representative of authority. In this case they represent the authority of those who have given man the laws of God. In verse 10 they cast these crowns before God, indicating their authority comes from God and that he is the source of all power and authority.

One objection often given to this particular interpretation of the twenty-four elders is that if they included the twelve apostles, John himself would have been included in the throne scene. We must remember that these twenty-four elders are symbolic. They would not have to be the actual twelve sons of Jacob and the twelve apostles to represent the ones who received God’s laws. Let us keep our interpretation symbolic, not literal.

Verse 5. 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.

The lightnings, thunderings, and voices came from the throne, indicating they came from God. These symbols are often used to represent the presence of God as in Ex. 19:16 when he descended to Mt. Sinai to give Moses the Ten Commandments. These symbols are also used in 8:5, 11:19, and 16:17, 18 to show that the events being described are taking place in the presence of God.

The seven lamps burning before the throne represent the seven Spirits of God. Since the number “7” is the complete sacred number, this must represent the total divine spirit of God or the Holy Spirit. We know the Holy Spirit is in close contact with the throne of God because 1Cor. 2:11 states, “Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.”

The seven lamps burning before the throne describe the Holy Spirit. Ps. 119:105 says, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” According to Acts 1:8; 2:3,4, when Christ ascended to heaven, he sent the Holy Ghost unto the apostles. Concerning this, Jesus said, “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of Truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak and he will show you things to come” (Jn. 16:13). The Word of God is a lamp unto our feet, and it lights our way that we may be able to walk according to the ways of God. The Holy Spirit gave us that Word. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is described as seven lamps burning before the throne of God. He gave mankind the complete divine revelation of God.

Verse 6. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind.

Concerning the sea of glass, Coffman says, "If the sea represents populations of the earth, as in later chapters, the calmness of it here would indicate the tranquility and peacefulness of souls in the service of God." He also says, "There is also the possibility that it is an inert factor in the vision."²

The sea of glass being described as crystal may be the key to understanding this passage. Pure crystal is completely transparent and colorless. It has no spots or discoloration. Throughout Revelation, the "sea" is used to represent masses of people. (See comments on 8:8.) If we apply this symbolism to this passage, it describes a mass of people, without flaws, standing before the throne of God. This could only represent Christians. Their sins are forgiven, and they stand flawless before the throne of God. This same situation is described in 7:15. Concerning Christians it states, "Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth in the throne shall dwell among them." God is sitting on his throne today, and those who have had their sins forgiven (Christians) are figuratively standing before that throne serving him day and night in his church.

Also, around the throne were four beasts. It is unfortunate that the KJV translates this word as "beasts." A much better translation is "living creatures," which is used in the ASV. To use the term "beast" in this verse causes considerable confusion when interpreting chapter 13. The "beasts" of chapter 13 are entirely different from these "living creatures." Because of this, we will use the language of the ASV and refer to these four "beasts" as "living creatures."

Most commentators cite passages in Is. 6:2 and Ezek. 10:20 when trying to determine who these living creatures are. In these passages similar creatures are called cherubim. Hendricksen comments concerning the cherubim: "They are a very high order of angels, one of the highest orders."³ He further concludes, "The cherubim guard the holy things of God, Gen. 3:24, Ex. 25:20. Hence, it is altogether normal and natural that we find them here in this vision in close proximity to the Throne."⁴ Whether these creatures are cherubim or not may be impossible to determine. Furthermore, just as was the case with the twenty-four elders, it is not necessary to know who these four living creatures are in order to determine what they represent.

To interpret symbolic language, we must search for representations, not identities. Let us consider some facts concerning these living creatures, and attempt to draw some conclusions about what they represent, not who they are. First, there are four of these living creatures. The number "4" is used in connection with things of this world, or things of a physical nature. Second, in chapter 6, each of these four creatures introduces one of the first four seals. These four seals deal with physical events that take place in this present world all during the Christian age. Third, these creatures are similar to the twenty-four elders in that their purpose is to continually worship God. Just as the number "24" ("12" doubled) indicates that all spiritual worship must be directed toward the one true God, the number "4" indicates that all physical things are from God, and we should apply our physical talents in service to him.

To interpret Revelation properly, we must be able to distinguish between those things that symbolize physical matters and those that symbolize spiritual matters. For example, the opening of the seals deals with physical things of this world, but the sounding of the trumpets deals with spiritual matters. The same concept applies here. The elders represent God's control over spiritual matters, and the living creatures represent his control over physical matters. (See comments on 6:1.)

Verse 7. And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle.

Summers gives the two most widely accepted views of this description of the four living creatures. One is that "the lion represents bravery, the young bull represents strength, the man represents intelligence, and the eagle represents swiftness or speed."⁵ The other is that "they represent the fourfold division of animal life so that all of God's creatures are worshipping him. The lion represents wild animal life, the calf represents domestic animal life, the man represents human life, and the eagle represents bird life."⁶ In keeping with our interpretation, the latter

seems to be more acceptable. If these four living creatures do represent all physical things, this interpretation fits very well. All physical creatures are created by God, and we as physical beings are to devote our physical activities to him.

Verse 8. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.

The main point concerning the living creatures is that they never cease to worship God. We as Christians should always be conscious of keeping God first in our lives.

These creatures have six wings full of eyes. Is. 6:2 pictures a similar creature with six wings. He covered his face with two covered his feet with two, and used two to fly. This description of the living creatures is also similar, although not identical, to living creatures seen by Ezekiel in a vision recorded in Ezekiel 1. The key to understanding this may be the number "6." In Revelation the number "6" brings to an end the things of this world. For example, after the completion of the sixth seal and the sixth trumpet, we are taken into the time of judgment. (See 6:12-17; 11:12-14.) The number "6" seems to deal with the period of time man spends here on this earth. Therefore, these living creatures with many eyes have total vision of everything that happens on this physical earth. This may represent the power of God to see and know all of man's physical actions.

Verses 9,10. And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

These verses show that all physical things (four living creatures) and all spiritual things (twenty-four elders) are created by God. Because of this they never cease to worship God who sits on his throne for ever and ever. In verse 10 the twenty-four elders cast their crowns before the throne, indicating their authority came from God and that he is the supreme authority. All things, both physical and spiritual, are created by God and for his pleasure. We must always give God the glory for our physical lives and, most assuredly, for our spiritual lives also.

Verse 11. Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

Because God created all things, he is worthy to receive the glory and honor and power. According to Coffman, these same words greeted the emperors in their triumphal processions.⁷ The Romans considered their emperor to be the most powerful force in existence, but the purpose of chapter 4 is to show man that God is the supreme being. He is the final source of all power. He created all things. He created them for his own pleasure. (See Col. 1:16.)

CHAPTER SUMMARY

As was stated in the introduction, certain symbols in chapter 4 are difficult to interpret. The only way to interpret difficult passages is by interpreting them in light of other passages that are understandable. We believe the interpretation of this chapter will become increasingly clear as the remainder of Revelation is studied and understood.

Chapters 4 and 5 are somewhat of an introduction to the remainder of the book since they are describing the throne of God and Christ. The main point of this vision is to show that God is in control of all things which take place on this earth, and beginning with chapter 6, many of these things which God controls are revealed.

We believe it will also become clear that Revelation deals with both physical and spiritual matters of this world. Therefore, to correctly interpret the book, we must first be able to determine if the matters being described are physical or spiritual. Since the number "12" is used to identify things of a spiritual nature, and can be doubled to "24," we have interpreted the twenty-four elders as representing those "24" lawgivers which God used to communicate his will

to mankind. This also shows that all of man's spiritual worship must be directed toward God by being obedient to the spiritual laws that he has given. In keeping with this line of reasoning, the number "4" is always used to identify matters of a physical nature, so we have interpreted the four living creatures as representing the complete physical creation of God. They show that man's physical actions must also be in service to God. We should worship him spiritually as well as physically, just as the twenty-four elders and four living creatures continually worship God in this vision.

Chapter 4 pictures God's throne as it exists today. This is not a description of heaven, but rather a symbolic description of God on his throne as he rules over all things today. We who are in the church are before that throne serving him continually. (See 7:15.)

¹James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on Revelation* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1979), p. 109.

²*Ibid.*

³William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1956), p. 106.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1951), p. 132.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁷Coffman, p. 112.