



Revelation - Chapter Four

Summary of Chapter Four

In Chapter Four, the scene is in heaven. Here John sees a throne and one seated on the throne whose appearance was that of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. The one who was seated on the throne here is God the Father.

Surrounding the throne were twenty four thrones with twenty four elders seated in them. Before the throne were seven burning torches of fire, which were the seven Spirits of God, i.e. the Holy Spirit. Then all around the throne, on each side were four living creatures who day or night never stop singing 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'

III. Revelation 4:1-7:17 - The Lamb and the scroll: current and coming woes, precursors of the end

John receives a heavenly vision of God on his throne and of the slain Lamb, whose triumph qualifies him to open a scroll and execute God's future purposes for history, the destruction of all his foes, and the vindication of those who trust in him. As the Lamb opens the scroll's seals, John sees images of God's instruments of judgment and of the saints who will receive salvation.

III.a Revelation 4:1-5:14 - Heaven opened: the Lamb receives the scroll

These visions, portraying events to take place after the 1st Century churches' struggles, begin with a door standing open in heaven, leading to a vision of God on his throne receiving ceaseless worship, and of the Lamb, who receives from him a mysterious sealed scroll.

III.a.i Revelation 4:1-11 - The Heavenly Worship

John is invited into the very throne room of God where he sees God the Father sitting on a throne surrounded by the magnificence of his glory, which John struggles to describe. Serving God are four strange looking beasts and twenty four elders, who worship God non-stop.

¹ After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! 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 there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!

Revelation 4:1-2

After this could signify that the following vision occurred immediately after John had received the dictation of the seven letters or that a period of time had passed. Both meanings are used frequently by John: eight times in his Gospel and eight times in Revelation.

I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! This is reminiscent of the way heaven was opened up to Jesus at his baptism: <<*And when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him*>> (Matthew 3:16).

The first voice like a trumpet is a reference back to 1:10. The Son of Man now summons John to come up here through the open door into heaven, and in the Spirit, refer to the comment on 1:10, where he sees the throne with one seated on it who is <<*the Lord God Almighty*>> (v.8), adored by his heavenly attendants as <<*our Lord and God*>> (v.11). This vision is similar to that given to the prophets, such as: <<*Then Micaiah said, 'Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him*>> (1 Kings 22:19), and also recorded in Isaiah 6:1-6 and Ezekiel 1:26-28. Its purpose is stated at the outset indicating that John will be shown symbols of future events, i.e. I will show you what must take place after this.

It should be noted that there is a reversal here between John's first vision recorded in Chapter One, where he was in the spirit on the Lord's Day and then heard the voice.

³ And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.

Revelation 4:3

The one seated there. Imitating Isaiah's and Ezekiel's reserve in describing visions of God's glory, John suggests luminous colours: like jasper and cornelian, surrounded by a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Yet John avoids precise description of the Almighty's visible features, perhaps because he knew no language to describe what he saw or perhaps in keeping with Jewish understanding that no one has ever seen God, as God had told Moses directly: <<*'But', he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live'*>> (Exodus 33:20), and stated by John elsewhere: <<*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known*>> (John 1:18), and: <<*No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us*>> (1 John 4:12). It may also have been in keeping with what Paul had written of his own experience of heaven: <<*I know a*

person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat>> (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). The jewels and colours used in this book, here and also in Revelation 21:19-20, are not meant to be interpreted individually but together signify the splendour and majesty of God.

⁴ Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.

Revelation 4:4

Around the throne are twenty-four thrones. The elders serving God encircle the main throne on which he is seated.

Seated on twenty-four thrones are twenty-four elders. There is much speculation as to who these elders are or and what they represent. Their number may reflect the orders of priests serving in the OT temple, refer to 1 Chronicles 24:7-19, but more likely they symbolise the unity of God's people, encompassing OT Israel led by the heads of the 12 tribes, and the NT church led by the 12 apostles, like the new Jerusalem's 12 gates and 12 foundations of Revelation 21:12-14.

Their thrones resemble those of God's heavenly court in Daniel 7:9-10 and referred to in Revelation 20:4. Some interpreters believe that these elders are angels, and that therefore they do not include themselves among the redeemed in 5:8-10.

Dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. White robes are worn by believers in Jesus, who have washed their robes in the blood of Jesus and are made white as snow. All through the OT people like David were looking forward for their Messiah. They believed, even though they were looking forward instead of backward to him. Therefore, it is in keeping with the understanding that these could be believers in Christ from the OT, even though they died before he came. Refer to Hebrews Chapter 11 and the associated comments. Gold means the purity of God. The grace of God placed these crowns on their head. They did nothing to earn them. It was a free gift from God for believing.

⁵ Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; ^{6a} and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Revelation 4:5-6a

Flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder display the terrifying splendour of God's glory, as when God appeared to his people at Mount Sinai: <<*On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled*>> (Exodus 19:16).

In front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God. As commented on previously in 3:1 this is a representation of the Holy Spirit, who is one person yet John describes him in a way that indicates his perfection as a member of the Godhead. The vision given to John is similar to: *<<He said to me, ‘What do you see?’ And I said, ‘I see a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it; there are seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it’>>* (Zechariah 4:2).

A sea of glass, like crystal appears in prophetic visions of God’s throne room: *<<Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness>>* (Exodus 24:10), *<<Over the heads of the living creatures there was something like a dome, shining like crystal, spread out above their heads>>* (Ezekiel 1:22), *<<And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands>>* (Revelation 15:2). It is the floor of heaven and the ceiling of the created universe, and its transparent tranquillity shows heaven’s peace in contrast to earthly turmoil.

^{6b} Around the throne, and 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 a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

‘Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.’

Revelation 4:6b-8

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne. The imagery of the throne being the focal point continues as the four living creatures encircle it.

Four living creatures exhibit features of cherubim, i.e. full of eyes, a lion, an ox, a human face, and a flying eagle; and seraphim, i.e. with six wings and singing ‘Holy, holy, holy’. These were glimpsed by previous prophets, i.e. Isaiah 6:2-3, Ezekiel 1:10 and 1:18. Variation and blending of such features is a reminder that in prophetic visions, images symbolise mysterious unseen realities. When the Lamb breaks the scroll’s seals, these living creatures will summon four horsemen to bring judgment (6:1-8).

In the prophet’s vision, each of the beasts had four faces, presented as one face on each side: *<<As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle>>* (Ezekiel 1:10). Since John seems to have been viewing them from one angle only, and the four living creatures were on

each side of the throne, then he may have had the perspective of only seeing the front face on one creature, the rear of another, the left side of the third and the right side of the fourth; thus showing that these creatures were the same as seen by Ezekiel in his vision.

Day and night without ceasing they sing. These close attendants represent and yet transcend the whole of the created order on earth and in heaven as they ceaselessly praise the Lord God the Almighty for his intrinsic attributes: infinite holiness and power, and eternal life in the repeated description: <<*who lives for ever and ever*>> (vv.9-10). John was not just looking in on a throne room but a place of worship. This is God's holiest temple.

What started as a heavenly illustration unfolding step by step before John's eyes now becomes a scene of active worship and proclamation. The use of verbs in the present tense, beginning in v.5, and the phrase day and night in v.8 give the impression that this is no longer something John saw once in a vision, but a ritual in heaven repeating itself over and over again without rest, pause or interruption.

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever,
¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

¹¹ 'You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.'

Revelation 4:9-11

The chorus of the four living creatures swells as the twenty-four elders fall down and cast their crowns before the throne, offering worship and expressing submission to God's authority. The elders extol God as worthy of threefold tribute: glory and honour and power, because he exerts his sovereign will in creating and sustaining all things.

The one who is seated on the throne is the Lord and God: <<*God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne*>> (Psalm 47:8). He is eternal, has always existed and is the one who lives for ever and ever.

You are worthy. The worthiness of the Father is recognised and he is given the praise that he deserves, for he is the Almighty.

God receives power, not in the sense that an omnipotent being can become stronger, but in the sense that the strength of his creatures is used to honour him. These praises of God for his eternal perfection and creative achievement are the prelude to a 'new song', which will laud God and the Lamb for redemption, the climactic display of their divine worthiness (5:9-10).

For you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. Jesus may have been the agent of creation as seen in John 1:1-4 but, as he always did during his earthly mission, he did so according to the will of the Father: <<*Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day*>> (John 6:37-39).

The elders' song celebrates both creation and God the creator, probably as a reference point for the new creation to come. Although John in his vision does not claim to experience the passage of time, he manages to convey a sense that what he saw is something still going on in heaven even as his prophecy is still being read today.