

THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

REVELATION 4 — THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Setting the Scene

The messages to the seven congregations are finished. Ephesus has lost its first love. Smyrna faces suffering. Pergamum and Thyatira struggle with compromise. Sardis has a reputation for being alive but is dying. Philadelphia has little strength, and Laodicea does not even recognize its true condition. After all of that, John looks—and sees an open door in heaven.

That change of scene matters. Revelation 4 does not pretend that the troubles of Chapters 2 and 3 have disappeared. Instead, John is allowed to see something greater than the troubles. The congregations have been looking at their cities, pressures, opposition and their own weaknesses. Now John is shown the throne.

What gives a burdened soul hope is sometimes a glimpse of what really lies ahead. What we see around us is real, but it is not all that is real. There is something greater than the turmoil. There is a throne standing in heaven, and Someone is sitting on it.

For John, exiled on Patmos, this vision must have felt something like being shown home. Revelation 4 pulls back the curtain and lets him—and us—look through the open door. And what John discovers is that heaven is not anxious. God has not abandoned His throne. The proper response to that reality is the response that fills this chapter: worship.

Lesson Summary

Revelation 4 opens a new section of John's vision with one of the great images of the book: “a door standing open in heaven” (4:1). John hears the voice he heard earlier, is called to “come up here,” and immediately finds himself before the throne of God. The throne dominates everything he sees. Around it are twenty-four elders clothed in white and wearing crowns. Before it burn seven lamps. Around it are four extraordinary living creatures whose appearance recalls Ezekiel's vision.

Yet the point of the chapter is not to provide us with a floor plan of heaven. John's language reaches for earthly images—precious stones, a rainbow, lightning, thunder, lamps and a sea like crystal—to describe a reality well beyond ordinary human experience. The imagery matters, but everything in the scene directs our attention upwards, toward the One sitting on the throne.

And every verb ultimately becomes worship. The four living creatures continually declare His praises, while the twenty-four elders fall before God and cast their crowns before His throne. Their final declaration tells us why He alone is worthy.

This chapter changes our perspective. The world may look chaotic from where we stand. The congregations may be struggling. John may still be on Patmos. Rome may still rule. But heaven reveals another reality.

There is a throne. And it is occupied.

The Big Idea

No matter the past, John is invited through an open door and shown another reality. At the center of everything is a throne, and God is sitting upon it.

That is the source of comfort for a believer. God has not surrendered His throne because the world is troubled. Everything points toward the One who rules. And the response to that reality is worship. The living creatures praise Him, and the elders bring their crowns and lay them at His feet.

The chapter therefore joins the two great purposes of Revelation: comfort and worship. We are comforted because God is still on His throne. And once we see Him there, worship is the natural response.

Opening Prayer

Father, open the eyes of my heart and help me to see beyond what is immediately in front of me. When the troubles of this world seem larger than Your promises, remind me that there is a throne in heaven and You are still sitting upon it. Teach me to see Your holiness, Your majesty and Your sovereignty. And like the elders before Your throne, teach me to lay down whatever crowns I think belong to me and worship the One who alone is worthy. Amen.

Commentary

A Door Standing Open

“After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven” (4:1). That is quite a way to begin a chapter. John has just finished hearing Yeshua speak to seven congregations about what is happening on earth. Now the perspective changes. John looks up.

The door is already standing open. John does not force it open, earn admission or discover the correct key. He is invited: “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things” (4:1). Ezekiel begins his great vision in much the same way: “the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God” (Ezekiel 1:1). John is again using language that belongs to Tanakh, from the prophets of Israel.

This open door links with Hosea's beautiful expression, “a door of hope” (Hosea 2:15). The setting of that promise makes the words even richer. Hosea is describing Israel's unfaithfulness to God. Judgment is real, but judgment will not be the end of the story. God

promises that He will woo His people again, speak tenderly to them and restore what has been lost. Then He says that He will give her “the valley of Achor as a door of hope.”

Achor is not an accidental place name. It takes us back to a moment in Joshua chapter 7 and one of the darkest moments after Israel entered the land. Achan’s sin brought disaster upon Israel, and the place where judgment fell became known as the Valley of Achor—the Valley of Trouble. Yet Hosea says that God can take the Valley of Trouble and make it a door of hope. The place associated with failure and judgment does not have to be the end of the journey. God can put a door there.

That is worth remembering when we unpack Revelation 4. John has just listened to Yeshua expose some very serious problems among His congregations. There has been lost love, compromise, immorality, spiritual deadness and lukewarm self-sufficiency. Those are real valleys of trouble. Yet when Chapter 4 begins, John sees something else: a door standing open.

Hope does not mean pretending that the Valley of Trouble was never there. Nor is hope simply like Pollyanna wishing that tomorrow will be more pleasant than today. Real hope is not a bigger house with more goodies in it. Hope is ultimately found in the person of Yeshua and in our present relationship with Him, even in troubled times.

The door standing open in heaven therefore invites us to change our perspective. Trouble is real, but trouble does not get the last word. Failure is real, but failure does not have to be our home. God can place a door of hope even in the Valley of Achor.

And what is on the other side of John's open door? Not an explanation of every trouble. A throne.

The Throne at the Center

“Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne” (4:2).

John could hardly make the point more strongly. The first great reality he sees in heaven is not an angel, a mansion, a departed saint or even one of the extraordinary creatures that will soon fill his vision. He sees a throne, and Someone is sitting on it.

The throne is the center of Revelation 4. Everything else is described in relation to it. There is a rainbow around the throne. Twenty-four lesser thrones surround this throne. Lightning and thunder come from the throne. Lamps burn before the throne. Something like a sea of crystal lies before the throne. The living creatures are around the throne, and eventually the elders fall down before the One who sits upon the throne. John wants our eyes drawn repeatedly back to the center.

That is particularly important after Chapters 2 and 3. Rome had a throne. Caesar had authority. Local rulers had authority. Religious and commercial systems could make life

difficult for those who followed Yeshua. From the street level, those powers could look enormous. But John is taken upstairs, as it were, and shown the throne above every throne.

And the throne is not empty.

That may be one of the simplest and most comforting truths in all of Revelation. God has not vacated His position. He has not lost control of history. He is not waiting nervously to discover what earthly rulers will do. “A throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne.”

John has seen this scene before—not personally, but in the Scriptures of his people. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy elders of Israel went up Sinai and “saw the God of Israel,” with something beneath His feet “like a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself” (Exodus 24:9–11). Micaiah said, “I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him” (1 Kings 22:19). Isaiah saw “the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted” while the seraphim cried, “Holy, holy, holy” (Isaiah 6:1–3). Ezekiel also saw the glory of God enthroned above the living creatures. John is not inventing a new heavenly landscape. He is being shown the same sovereign God whom Israel's prophets had seen.

And that means the move from Chapters 2–3 into Chapter 4 is even more important than a change of scenery. The congregations have just heard what Yeshua thinks of them. Now they are shown who actually governs their world.

The Throne Is Described, but Not Explained Away

John continues by describing the One sitting on the throne as having the appearance of jasper and sardius, with a rainbow around the throne “like an emerald in appearance” (4:3).

Immediately we must remember what kind of literature we are reading. John is trying to put heavenly realities into human words.

That is why the word “like” matters so much in Revelation. God does not look like a gemstone. There is not necessarily a literal emerald rainbow hanging over a piece of heavenly furniture. John is reaching for things he knows—precious stones, brilliant light, color, thunder, fire and crystal—to describe something beyond ordinary human experience. I caution people against turning the scene into a literal architectural description of heaven. John gives us a painted scene, but the painting points beyond itself.

We should therefore be cautious about assigning a separate theological meaning to every color and stone. Revelation invites us to see before it invites us to dissect. The cumulative effect is splendor, brilliance, majesty and awe. John wants us overwhelmed by the throne and especially by the One who occupies it.

The rainbow is particularly evocative. We have seen a rainbow before. After the flood, God placed His bow in the clouds as the sign of His covenant with Noah and with every living creature (Genesis 9:8–17). Here, surrounding the throne from which judgment will eventually proceed, John sees something that recalls God's covenant faithfulness. The God who judges is also the God who remembers His covenant.

Then come “flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder” from the throne (4:5). Again the language sends us back in the Bible, this time to Sinai. When God descended upon the mountain at Shavuot, that is, the time of the giving of the Torah, there were thunder and lightning, a thick cloud and the sound of a trumpet (Exodus 19:16–19). John is not showing us a tame God. The One on the throne is holy and awesome. Yet this is the same God who called Israel to Himself and entered covenant with them.

Revelation will use thunder, lightning and other terrifying imagery again. But here, before the judgments begin to unfold, we are shown their source. They do not emerge from an uncontrolled universe. They proceed from the throne.

Twenty-Four Elders

Around the throne John sees twenty-four other thrones and seated upon them are twenty-four elders dressed in white and wearing golden crowns (4:4). Who are they?

I believe these represent the whole redeemed people of God, with the number twenty-four bringing together the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. That remains an attractive reading, particularly as Revelation later brings those two groups together in the imagery of the New Jerusalem. These elders themselves represent their constituents. The elders are clothed in white and crowned, images already familiar from Yeshua’s promises to the overcomers in the seven churches.

But I would not insist that John is giving us a mathematical formula that must be decoded. The important thing is what these elders do. Although they sit on thrones and wear crowns, their greatness is expressed by worship. When the living creatures praise God, the elders get off their thrones. They fall before the One who sits upon the throne and cast their crowns before Him (4:10).

There is something wonderfully upside down about that picture. We spend much of our lives acquiring things—position, recognition, influence, accomplishments, perhaps even a good name. Crowns represent achievement and victory. Yet in heaven the crowns end up on the floor.

Winning in life may be a consideration of politicians and sports enthusiasts, but I believe it is found by falling on the floor before God and casting our crowns of victory at His much-more-victorious feet. The elders do not cease to have significance when they bow. They discover what their significance is for. Whatever authority, honor or victory God gives us ultimately becomes something we can return to Him in worship.

The Sea and the Living Creatures

Before the throne John sees “something like a sea of glass, like crystal” (4:6). Again, “like” keeps us from turning John’s vision into a construction diagram. He sees something vast, brilliant and crystal-like before the throne.

The image may also carry echoes of the book of Exodus. When Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders saw the God of Israel, beneath His feet was something “like a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself” (Exodus 24:10). John is seeing something new, but the biblical vocabulary is old. Heaven is not disconnected from the story God has already been telling Israel.

Then appear the four living creatures: one like a lion, one like a calf, one with a face like a man and one like a flying eagle. They are covered with eyes and have six wings. The scene draws together imagery particularly from Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6. John's creatures are not identical to Ezekiel's, nor are they identical to Isaiah's seraphim. We do not need to force the visions into exact correspondence. John is drawing from both prophetic worlds.

The number four also deserves our attention. In biblical imagery, four can suggest universality or the whole created order—the four directions, the four corners of the earth and the four winds of heaven. We should not make that an inflexible rule every time the number appears, but Revelation will use four repeatedly in this way. When we read four things in a list, that could speak to us the same as a list using the number four. Here, the four living creatures surrounding the throne may therefore help us see creation in its fullness gathered before its Creator.

I like the two suggestions from respected theologians about what the creatures represent. Paul Barnett saw the lion as the noblest creature, the ox as the strongest, the human as the wisest and the eagle as the fastest. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes understood them more broadly as representing the great divisions of animate creation: wild animals, domesticated animals, birds and humanity.

We do not have to decide between those interpretations to hear what John wants us to hear. Creation is gathered around its Creator. And creation worships. Day and night the living creatures do not cease saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come” (4:8). That takes us directly back to Isaiah 6. Isaiah heard the seraphim calling to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 6:3). Centuries later John hears heaven still singing the holiness of God.

Earthly kingdoms have risen and fallen in the meantime. Israel has known exile and return. Babylon, Persia, and Greece have come and gone. Rome now dominates John's world. John himself sits in exile on Patmos. And heaven is still singing the same song.

Worship Is the Natural Response

The four living creatures do not simply describe God. They worship Him. “Day and night they do not cease” declaring His holiness (4:8). And whenever they give glory, honor and thanks to the One sitting on the throne, the twenty-four elders respond. They leave their own thrones, fall before Him and worship.

There is a pattern here worth noticing. The closer John gets to the throne, the less interested anyone seems to be in themselves.

The elders have thrones, but they get off them. They have crowns, but they take them off. They possess honor, yet their response to God's presence is to give honor away. Their crowns end up before His throne because whatever victory, position or recognition they possess has meaning only because of the One who gave it to them.

That is a useful corrective to the way we sometimes think about worship. Worship is more than singing, although singing certainly can be part of it. Worship is the recognition that God is worthy and that everything we possess ultimately belongs to Him. Our accomplishments, ministries, reputations, possessions and even the victories God has enabled us to win become crowns we can lay before Him. Some use the term 'worth-ship' to describe this humble action.

The elders say: "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power" (4:11). Why is He worthy? "For You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created."

That takes us all the way back to Genesis. Before Israel, before Rome, before Patmos, before any of the congregations of Asia Minor and before any of us, there was God. Everything else is creation. He alone is Creator.

That distinction matters enormously. Revelation introduces us to impressive creatures and frightening powers. Some will demand allegiance and even worship. But none of them created anything. The beast is a creature. Caesar is a creature. Babylon is part of creation. Every political ruler, economic system and spiritual power that claims ultimate allegiance is still on the created side of the Creator-creature divide.

Only God belongs on the throne.

That is why worship is not simply an emotional response to a beautiful heavenly scene. It is an announcement about reality. When the elders fall down, they are declaring who actually deserves ultimate allegiance.

Holy, Holy, Holy

The song of the living creatures deserves another look. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come" (4:8). John has heard that language already. In Revelation 1, God is described as the One "who is and who was and who is to come." Now that description becomes worship. Theology has become doxology. What John knows about God gives him reason to praise God.

The threefold "holy" carries us directly back to Isaiah 6, where the seraphim call to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts." John is hearing the worship of Israel's Scriptures sounding again around the heavenly throne.

And there is something wonderfully reassuring about that continuity. Isaiah saw earthly kings come and go. John has watched Rome rise to enormous power. We have watched other governments, movements and personalities appear enormously important in our own lifetimes. Yet heaven's song has not needed updating.

God is still holy. God is still Almighty. God still sits on the throne.

That is why worship and comfort belong together so naturally in Revelation. We do not worship in order to persuade ourselves that our problems are insignificant. Some problems are enormous. The seven churches knew that. John knew it on Patmos. Worship puts those problems beside the greater reality of God and causes us to see them pale in comparison.

Paul the Apostle wrote, "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

There's No Place Like Home

And that brings us back to where we began. What is it about home that makes it so compelling? After a long day, after a long journey, after living somewhere that does not quite feel as though we belong, we want to go home. John himself was away from the people and places he knew. Patmos was not home.

Then the door opened.

What John sees in Revelation 4 is not primarily a description of our future accommodation. There is no tour of heavenly houses. He sees the throne of God. He sees worship. He sees creation gathered around its Creator. He sees a reality in which everything is finally oriented toward the One to whom it belongs.

That is home.

Home, finally, is not merely where we came from or where our belongings are stored. For the people of God, home is where God is. Our hope is not simply that one day our troubles will stop. Our hope is that we belong to Him and will be with Him.

John needed that vision after the troubles of Chapters 2 and 3. So do we. Look up. The door is open. The throne is occupied. And there really is no place like home.

Takeaways

1. We are invited to look beyond the troubles immediately in front of us and see the throne.
2. God can make a door of hope even in a Valley of Trouble. Failure, suffering and judgment do not have to be the final word.

3. The heavenly images point beyond themselves to the majesty, holiness and sovereignty of an indescribable God.
4. Whatever crowns God allows us to wear ultimately belong at His feet. Winning in the kingdom is made greater when we fall down before the King.
5. Worship changes our perspective because it reminds us who is Creator and who is creation. God alone is worthy of our ultimate allegiance.

Memory Verse

Revelation 4:11

“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

What's Next?

John has seen the throne of God. Now his attention turns to a scroll that no one seems worthy to open. John weeps—until he is told to look at the Lion of Judah. But when he looks, he sees a Lamb who has been slain. Sound confusing? We will unpack that in our next chapter.

In Revelation 5, we discover why the Lamb alone is worthy, and why all heaven responds in worship.

Listen to the Original Teaching

“There’s No Place Like Home” — Revelation 4, 13 November 2004

<https://youtu.be/rBJY12rTkBs?si=8EB-C4yfAmdJjDVn&t=30>

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