

## A Glimpse at the Worship of Heaven

Revelation 4:1–5:14

By [Derek Thomas](#)

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

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

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and worship Him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

"You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for You created all things, and by Your will they were created  
and have their being."

Then I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty

angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

### **"After this I looked..." (4:1)**

It is a phrase (sometimes rendered, "after this I saw...") that we will see again as we study this book (7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1). It is important for us to realize that John is not signaling a particular chronology of the future by this statement, as though what happens next will be *subsequent* to whatever happened in the previous section or chapter. Rather, John is merely telling us the order in which

*he received these visions.* Since the visions will repeat themselves, a failure to appreciate this point will lead us astray. Having *heard*, in the letters he writes in chapters 2 and 3, that Jesus reigns over the church, John is now given a *sight* of Jesus reigning in glorious triumph. The sight he sees is accompanied by music and words which have become to the source of the church's praise ever since.

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!  
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;  
Holy, holy, holy, Merciful and mighty!  
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Reginald Heber's hymn still evokes what is central to our understanding of God. Full of biblical allusions to Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 as it is, reminds us that the praise we offer to God is filled with a sense of awe and wonder at the majesty of his holy character.

The scene has changed from the closed door in Laodicea to an open door that leads to heaven; the mention of a throne (3:21) now leads to a glimpse of one. From the poverty stricken state of the church below, John's gaze is taken upwards to things as they truly are. The upward glance is often the signal of a new perspective on things. John is being reminded that God is in control of providence. The church may be languishing; Satan may be doing his worst; but God is reigning on high. Two issues change the perspective: location and time.

As for location, we are taken up to 'heaven' (4:1), not the life hereafter so much as the life here and now, but from a different perspective. As Paul would remind the Ephesians that they are 'blessed' and 'seated' with Christ 'in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 1:3; 2:6), so John is reminded of a greater reality than that which can be seen and touched. The opening of heaven is a characteristic apocalyptic phenomenon, preparing us for the giving of new (or perhaps forgotten) revelation. How much the church needs to heed it! There is a reality which transcends that which we can see with our physical eyes.

As for time, John is shown 'what must take place after this' (4:1), a reference which appears to include within it the whole of history from John's time to ours and beyond. Since John has already used this phrase already in 1:19, it is reasonable to conclude that its repetition here is signaling a parallel vision: what we see in chapter 4 is true at the same time as what is seen in the previous chapters. Jesus is reigning and surrounded by the praise of angels and departed souls as He writes to the seven churches. Encapsulated in a single vision is a glimpse of the church and the world. God has the whole world in his hands! More particularly, He has the church and her future in His hands! As Jeremiah put it: 'A glorious throne, exalted from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary' (Jer. 17:12).

Chapters 4 and 5 belong together for they establish the same truth, or *truths*: that

God is sovereign, and that God is to be worshipped. Both of these truths are, of course, complementary; they belong together as shoes do upon feet, but fallen mankind has neglected both, and the church has often failed to see the connection between the two. 'If God is not sovereign, then God is not God' the saying goes; and how right it is! From the very beginning, God showed Himself as Creator, sovereignly making all things out of nothing, bringing everything that has existence into being by the Word of His mouth. The story of the Bible is the story of mankind ignoring His kingship, coveting other lords to rule over him, gods that could be manipulated and cajoled to do whatever man desired. Worship, consequently, has been misplaced: man has worshipped creatures rather than the Creator (Rom. 1). The mind of fallen man, as Calvin would put it, is a perpetual factory of idols.

In one vision, Revelation now brings into focus the One who truly rules the world. There is a 'throne in heaven with someone sitting on it' (4:2). It is not the first of its kind in the Bible. In particular, it shows some similarities to the vision of God in Ezekiel 1, with its depiction of a throne. Here in Revelation 4, God's dazzling light is portrayed by being bedecked with precious jewels. Several images come together, including that of a rainbow whose beauty is a sign of God's covenant mercy to a fallen world (4:3; Gen 9:13), and stones (jasper, carnelian, and emerald; 4:3) anticipating an entire list of precious stones in chapter 21 (vv. 19-20).

God's throne is surrounded by twenty-four thrones on which sit twenty-four elders (4:4). The number, twenty four, symbolizes the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of the New Testament era s collectively symbolizing the church of all ages. These "elders" are probably angels representing Old and New Testament saints. Some have seen them as representatives of the twenty-four orders of priests in the Old Testament (c.f. 1 Chron 24:4). What is being shown is of great significance. The saints of the Old Testament period, together with those who have died thus far in the New, are not only alive; they are reigning! To saints concerned about loved ones who have been martyred s many of the first readers of Revelation were concerned about their friends and relatives who had died in this way s this vision could only have come as wonderful news.

The flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder (4:5; c.f. 8:5; 11:19; 16:18) are reminiscent of Sinai and the giving of the Law (Exod. 19:16). Before the throne are seven lamps (c.f. Zech 4:2-3, 10) which are said to be "seven spirits of God" (6:5; c.f. Zech 4:6). In the next chapter, a further explanation is given describing these seven spirits as the "seven horns and seven eyes" of the slain Lamb "standing in the center of the throne" (5:6). The Zechariah passages help us understand that what is in view here is that the Lamb (Jesus) sees and knows what is taking place on earth (eyes) and is able to do something about it (horns). By the "seven spirits" (i.e. the Holy Spirits "my Spirit" [Zech 4:6]), God exercises His sovereignty in the earth. The Holy Spirit carries out God's plan and purpose.

The "sea of glass" (4:6, note that it looked like a sea of glass, John is having difficulty describing everything that he saw) brings back memories of the laver of water in the temple used for ceremonial washings, a symbol that continues in New Testament times in baptism. The portrait of heaven in Revelation is modeled after the temple (7:15; 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5-16:1; 16:17), and here we are being given a symbolic portrait of their "cleansed" inhabitants. "Nothing impure will ever enter it..." (21:27). Some have seen in the "sea of glass" an allusion to the Red Sea, and the power of God that calmed it and brought it into submission; an allusion here, then, of cosmic power.

In the center and around the throne were four living creatures (4:6). It is not the *church's* worship that is first alluded to, but that of the *entire creation*. The four "living creatures" are a lion (the noblest), an ox (the strongest), a man (the wisest) and an eagle (the swiftest). Early writers thought these creatures represented the four Gospel writers. However, what is more likely is that these signal the Bible's anticipation of the redemption of the creation itself (Rom. 8:21); there will be a new heaven and a new *earth* (2 Pet. 3:13). In the background are similar (though not identical) passages in the Old Testament (Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1). The entire creation is worshiping God! Heaven is a place of worship.

## Holiness

It is interesting that the focus of heavenly worship is the holiness of God. The stress upon God's holiness reminds us of the seraphim in Isaiah 6 who sing a similar song emphasizing an identical attribute of God. Bible dictionaries convey the notion that holiness spells out what is different, the way in which God separates himself from the rest of his creation. So important is this word 'holy' that we find an interesting fact in the Bible: God's 'name' is qualified by the adjective holy more often than all the other qualifiers put together. The first and the last songs of the Bible exalt God's holiness. Moses, thinking of what God had done in the crossing of the Red Sea and the deliverance of Israel, sang: 'Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you — *majestic in holiness*, awesome in glory, working wonders?' (Exod. 15:11). And we shall find in Revelation 15 that those who had been victorious over the beast sing a similar song: 'Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to Your name? For *You alone are holy*' (Rev. 15:4). Combining the worship offered by the four creatures and the twenty-four elders, several attributes seem to surface in the worship of the heavenly host which give further expression to God's holiness:

God in Almighty. He is the "Lord God *Almighty*" (4:8). His power and majesty are beyond human grasp. He is the Creator of everything that has existence; by the Word of his power He brought what is into being. The truth encourages as much as it intimidates. For languishing churches such as those depicted in Asia Minor, facing the onslaughts of Satan, struggling in a wicked and hostile world, the

knowledge that God is sovereign is invigorating in a way that nothing else is.. God's sovereignty is the guarantee of providence. 'The Lord reigns' (Psa. 93:1). He is the Creator of all that is: 'by Your will they were created and have their being' (4:11).

God is great, in the sense that He is exalted. When the twenty four elders join in the worship of God later in the chapter (4:10), they fall down before Him, expressing awe and submissiveness. God is incomprehensible. His ways are not our ways; His thoughts, not our thoughts (Isa. 55:8). Augustine was once asked the question, What was God doing before He created the world? "Making hell for people who ask questions like that," was his reply. Blunt, but effective! There is a mystery about the nature of God that should make us fear him in a spirit of reverence and humility. Genuine worshippers wish to blot themselves out of the picture so that God may become everything.

The four living creatures are said to have six wings, as though ready to fly in whatever direction God commands: worship must always yield in service. It was Paul's conclusion to his systematic treatment of the application of redemption: 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God —this is your spiritual act of worship' (Rom. 12:1).

God is glorious. The Bible word 'glory' (4:11) is one expressive of weight and significance. There is a consideration to be given to God that exceeds that which we give of anyone or anything else. No one is of greater significance than God. God's glory is His nature and power *shown forth* (cf. Jn. 2:13). When God is said to *receive* glory, it indicates God being worshiped as God; He is being given the honour that is due to Him. Worship is to be taken up with the assurance that something of the very being of God has been revealed to us.

God is eternal. God 'was, and is, and is to come' (4:8; cf. 1:8). In contrast to ourselves, the four creatures exalt the eternity of God's existence. Unlike the creation, there is beginning nor end to the existence of God.

Worship is all about our response to God. It is giving Him the praise and adoration that is due to his name. The more we know of God, the more childlike our faith will become. We cannot know too much, nor can this truth ever be over-emphasized. Even John was to get it wrong, worshipping an angel rather God. "Worship God!" the angel said to him (19:10).

An important feature of their worship is the allusion to God as "the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (4:8). There are echoes here of God's revealed name as the "I AM WHO I AM" given to Moses (Exod 3:14). It is also capable of being rendered "I WILL BE WHO I WIL BE." The name is further identified as "LORD" (Exod 3:15, and capitalized in our English translations). This is God's covenant name Yahweh (or "Jehovah," as older renditions pronounced

it).

The worship of heaven is the worship of Yahweh, Israel's Covenant LORD. He will be identified as Jesus in the chapter 5, as He has been already (1:8). This is the staggering claim of New Testament revelation: "Jesus Christ is LORD (Yahweh, or Jehovah)" (Phil 2:11). He is given glory (4:9), and worshiped (4:10).

"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (4:11). The words remind us of Nebuchadnezzar's words in Daniel 4:35-37. God's creative and upholding sovereignty is the basis for worship. The will of God is ultimate. Not man's will, not the church's will; but the will of God alone. He creates and upholds to fulfill His own purpose. Appreciating this reduces us to size. "To God alone be the glory" was the watchword of the Reformation, and that, because they had understood that God is sovereign. Heaven will eternally reflect this perspective and earthly worship seeks to conform to it.

### **Jesus is Lord**

The identity of the One who sits on the throne deserves further attention Who is He? Clearly, in chapter 5, we are introduced to a parallel truth: Christ, too, sits enthroned in heaven. Worship is afforded him also. The focus on God in chapter 4 now narrows to that of Jesus Christ.

The sovereignty of God we see depicted in chapter could seriously call into question God's mercy. How can sinners ever find their way into God's presence without the recoil of justice barring them? It is only as we discover that the holiness of God is the holiness of *Christ* that an answer to this dilemma is forthcoming. God has in Himself (in Christ!) resolved the problem that sin has caused. God has become the Savior of sinners!

Such is the problem depicted in the opening of the fifth chapter. A "scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals" (5:1) is viewed suggesting a comprehensive knowledge of things. The NIV adoption of "scroll" may be right: scrolls written on both sides and sealed in such a way that its contents were successively revealed as each separate seal was broken were known in the first century. Some have noted the similarity with wills or testaments, the contents of which were preserved against alteration by seals. The fact that John uses the verb "to open" rather than "unroll" (5:2) may suggest a book, rather than a scroll, but the consensus has been for the scroll.

But what does the scroll contain? An angel proclaims the dilemma: is there anyone in all of heaven and earth who can break open the seals and peek inside? The allusion is almost certainly to Ezekiel 2:10 where the prophet is shown a similar scroll, on both sides of which were words "of lament and

mourning and woe." This would seem to indicate that the scroll contains the judgments of God, rather than, say, the names of the elect (as some have suggested). The fact that as yet these judgments (revealed by the breaking of the seals) have not been revealed (from John's perspective) argues against the idea that these judgments portray the history that has already happened (as futurists believe).

Is anyone able to open these seals? Isaiah had depicted a similar scenario (Isa. 29:11-12). In that instance, Jesus, in the synagogue at Nazareth, had caused a stir by unlocking the meaning of Isaiah's prophecy by saying, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus broke the seals and showed us what was inside! Philip asked the Ethiopian, also reading Isaiah, "Do you understand what you read?" Philip pointed him to the Lamb of God and thereby unlocked the seal of Isaiah's suffering servant.

What is needed, of course, is a Redeemer, a Mediator, one who can represent God before man, and man before God. The one who unlocks the seals is the Mediator. John makes clear his sovereignty by representing him as standing "in the center of the throne" (5:6). The sovereignty of God is the sovereignty of Christ. At the very point where we have seen the Father in chapter 4, we see the Son in chapter 5. Christ is the focus of all attention, the one with whom every other is enthralled. The paeans of praise rise to Him as they do to God himself, for there is no distinction: the church, the angels, the whole of creation sing His praise and offer Him worship. And why? Because a kingdom has been given to Him. The Lamb is worthy to open the scroll because He has purchased men by His blood. In appearance He looks as though He has been slain (5:9). Through His passion He has "purchased men for God," establishing them as "a kingdom and priests to serve... God" (5:9-10).

Several things seem to come to the surface:

The very existence of a Mediator is something for celebration. The natural reaction to the sight of a sealed scroll was to weep. But God has found a way both to be just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

The Mediator is both a Lion (5:5) and a Lamb (5:6); He stands in the very center of the throne (5:6) and appears slain (5:6,9,12). He is both God and man. To Him belongs sovereignty and dependence. He is both invincible and mortal.

The kingdom (5:10) which He makes from 'every tribe and language and people and nation' (5:9) is one given to Him as the Mediator. He reigns in the interests of this kingdom which He has won on the basis of the redemption which He has purchased. One day, He will surrender this kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:28).

The imagery is suggestive of the fact that Christ, in His exalted condition, still bears the marks of His suffering (5:6). The pre-ascension body of Jesus was in a

temporary, transitional state and explains in part the inability of the disciples to recognize him (Mary, for one, thought Him to be the gardener [John 20:15!]). Whatever changes mark his ascension, whatever Paul may mean when he describes the resurrected body as 'glorious' (Phil. 3:21), it does not mean that He has lost the marks of his humanity, and certainly not those marks which identify His role as the suffering Servant.

## **Songs of Loudest Praise**

The worship described in the closing verses of chapter 5 is that of the ransomed church. Its praise is mixed with that of angels, "numbering thousands upon thousands" (5:11). Angelic worship, though unfallen and not themselves part of the redemptive community mentioned in 5:9-10, nevertheless join in the acclamation of Christ.

Heaven is preoccupied with the worship of God and of the Lamb (5:14). Three features are worth noting.

First, the corporate 'Amen' (5:14). There is something affirming about the 'Amen'. It is an audible response to the truthfulness of all that has been said. According to Justin Martyr, describing mid-second century worship, the "Amen" punctuated the worship. *Epeuphūmei* he called them, "shout in applause." It is the title already given to Jesus (3:14; cf. Isa 65:16). It is the affirmation that God's "Yes" means "Yes!" and his "No" means "No!" (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20). The church tried using the Greek *aleuthinos* for a while, but the word means "that which is not false" and didn't ring true. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, much used in the first century, had favored *genoito* for the Old Testament "Amen" but its 'would that it were so' also rang hollow. So, the church reverted to using the Hebrew 'Amen' like Jewish saints did.

Secondly, praying (5:9). No gathering for worship can avoid the suppliants cry to God. Prayers are like "incense" their aroma rising into the nostrils of God like a sweet smelling aroma (cf. 5:8).

Thirdly, singing (5:9, 12, 13). Worship sings. When Jesus is viewed in his majestic glory, and his work comprehended in its regal splendor, songs are irrepressible. Five songs in all in these two chapters, the first two to God the Creator, the third and fourth to the Redeemer, and the last one to both Creator and Redeemer together.

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