

Ministry of Grace

Revelation Chapter 4

¹After 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."

²At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³And 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. ⁴Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, ⁶and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ¹¹"Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." [ESV]

Notes

Special note:

Throughout the first three chapters of Revelation the Greek word *ekklesia* is used repeatedly. This word is made up of *ek*, meaning “out” or “out of” and a form of the verb *kaleō*, meaning “to call out to someone, inviting him or her to come or to go somewhere.” Thus, *ekklesia* refers to “the called out ones.” Originally, it was a reference to those who were called out by civil authorities for a public meeting. In the New Testament, however, it is always used as a reference to the church – those who have been called out of the world to follow Jesus Christ.

In the book of Revelation the word *ekklesia* is not used at all after chapter 3, except as part of the post-script in the final chapter. This is one more piece of evidence that the church will not be present during the tribulation period.

Revelation 4:1

¹After 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."

Back in **Revelation 1:19** when John was given the outline for what he was to write about, he was told:

Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. (**Revelation 1:19**) [ESV]

The phrase “**that are to take place after this**” is from the Greek *mellei ginesthai meta tauta*, which literally translates to “which will be after these things.” The Greek text for **Revelation 4:1** starts off with *meta tauta* (after these things). In other words, the things described here are the things that are to take place after the things of chapter 3.

Chapters 6-19 of Revelation detail the 7 year period we call the Tribulation, or more correctly, Daniel’s 70th week. Nowhere in these chapters is the church mentioned, since it will be kept “from [out of] the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth” as Christ promised the church in Philadelphia back in **Revelation 3:10**.

The last two words of this verse are also, *meta tauta* implying that the events of verse one are separate and distinct from the events of chapter three and from the events of **Revelation 4:2-11**.

“**the first voice, which I had heard**” is apparently the same voice that John heard in **Revelation 1:10, 11**

¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet

¹¹saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, ..." [ESV]

And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here,"

This event sounds quite similar to:

¹⁵For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds

to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (**I Thessalonians 4:15-17**) [ESV]

But do not take two things which sound similar to necessarily be the same thing (though they may be). In the rapture we are changed from our earthly body to a heavenly body like Christ's resurrection body. In this verse John is not transformed but becomes "in the Spirit" as we will see in the next verse. Also, John does not meet the Lord in the air; rather, he is transported directly to God's throne room so that he can see the things that will take place "after these things."

Although this is not a description of the rapture of the church, it may very well be an implication of the rapture because, as we will see in the following verses, the church is in the next scene and nowhere referred to as being on earth for the remainder of the book of Revelation. We will talk more about this later.

Revelation 4:2

²At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.

"**I was in the Spirit**" Literally, "I became in the Spirit." This is the same expression that John used in **Revelation 1:10** referring to the altered state he was in through the power of the Spirit of God such that God could reveal this prophecy to him in a vision. This also sounds very similar to Paul's description of his vision:

²I know a man 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. ³And I know that this man was caught up into paradise--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows (**2 Corinthians 12:2,3**) [ESV]

"**Behold**" = Greek *idou*, which means "look!" or "pay attention!" Whenever you see this word in the book of Revelation it is an indication that John was amazed or astonished at what he saw. It is his way of drawing our attention to what he sees.

Revelation 4:3

³And 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.

"**He who sat there had the appearance of**" It does not say "He who sat there was." This is a simile, not a definitive description.

"**Jasper**" Most likely this is the diamond as described in **Revelation 21:11**

¹¹... its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

This stone represents the holiness and purity of God

"**Carnelian**" or, sardius. This is a fiery, blood red ruby which most likely got its name from the city of Sardis where many of these were found. This stone may be representative of the impending judgment and wrath of God that is about to be poured out on the inhabitants of the earth.

The jasper and the sardius were the first and the last of the 12 stones, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, on the breastplate of the Jewish high priest (**Exodus 28:17-20**).

“**Rainbow around the throne**” The word translated “around” is the Greek word *kuklothen*, which is derived from *kuklos*, meaning “a circle.” Therefore, *kuklothen* means “to encircle.” It is not like the half circle rainbow that we see, but it apparently completely encircled the throne.

“**In appearance like an emerald.**” Unlike the rainbow that we are familiar with, this rainbow was in shades of green like an emerald.

Revelation 4:4

⁴Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.

“**Around the throne**” Again the word translated “around” is the Greek word *kuklothen*, meaning “to encircle.”

“**twenty-four elders**” There has been much discussion and debate as to who these twenty-four elders represent. There are three prevailing opinions, 1) they are angels, 2) they represent Israel and the church, and, 3) they represent the church. We will here address each of these in order.

1) **Angels** – This opinion is primarily based on **Revelation 5:8-10** which says:

⁸When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. ¹⁰You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth." [NASB]

⁸Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, ¹⁰And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth." [NKJV]

Based on the fact that these elders proclaim in verse 10 “you have made them ...” [NASB] the belief is that they could not themselves be the ones that they are singing about. Hence, they must be angelic beings. Nearly all of the Greek manuscripts, however, use the personal pronoun *hēmas* (us) not *humas* (them) in verse ten. Hence, they were saying “You have made **us** to be a kingdom of priests to our God.” The real question is “Who are the ones singing?” Since the Angels around the throne are sinless, holy creatures, they have no need to be redeemed or purchased with the blood of Christ. Therefore, even though the four living creatures (angelic beings) have fallen down before the Lamb, they must not be the ones singing. Also, throughout the Bible, with the possible exception of **Job 38:7**, it is nowhere recorded that the angels sing. Every place in the New Testament where the action of angels is recorded as singing (such as **Luke 2:13**), it is translated from the Greek verb *legō*, meaning “to say or to speak.” Even in the Job verse noted above, the Hebrew word is *rānan*, which according to *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, means “to shout for joy; to sing joyfully. It indicates the utterance or crying out of a person or persons. The character of the cry must be discerned by the context or actual intended use of the verb: Often it indicates crying out in joy or exaltation.” Therefore, it is best to see only the elders as singing here.

The grammatical structure of the Greek text seems to indicate that it was only the elders, not the living creatures, who held the harps and bowls. Also, notice that these elders have crowns on their

heads. Nowhere in Scripture are angels said to have crowns. These crowns are victor's crowns (see discussion of "crowns" below), which are those given as rewards to the church and not promised to any others in the Bible. Also, notice that the elders are sitting on thrones, which is indicative of their position as kings and judges, both attributes which are promised to Christians, never to angels.

Finally, the term "elders" literally means "older ones" and since all angels are the same age, this term cannot be used of angels and is not used of angels anywhere else in all of Scripture.

- 2) **Representatives of Israel and the church**. There are those who claim that the 24 elders represent the 12 tribes of Israel (descendants of the 12 sons of Jacob) and the 12 apostles. Hence, they must be a representation of the combined people of Israel and the church.

The first problem with this is that there are at least 13 apostles named in the New Testament (Paul was not one of the twelve, but is repeatedly called an apostle). Also, there is indication in the New Testament that others were called apostles, such as Timothy and Sylvanus (Silas) (**1 Thessalonians 2:6**) and Barnabas (**Acts 14:14**). These other apostles were not named among the twelve in **Matthew 10:2-4**. However, in **Revelation 21:14** there is mention of "the twelve apostles of the Lamb." So this is not definitive proof that these don't include representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The other problem is that not all of Israel is saved. Many of them will be cast into the lake of fire. But, even if 12 of the elders represent all of "saved" Israel, it is difficult to reconcile this since this event occurs before the salvation of Israel through the Great Tribulation. So part of the remnant of Israel would still on earth while their representatives would at the same time be sitting on thrones in heaven. (MacArthur, 2005)

- 3) **Representatives of the church** – This interpretation makes the most sense, since the church has been raptured and is in heaven at this time, and the number 24 is used elsewhere in the Scriptures to indicate a representation of the whole. For instance, there were 24 officers of the sanctuary representing the 24 courses of the Levitical priests (**1 Chronicles 24:4-5** and **7-18**), as well as 24 divisions of singers in the temple (**1 Chronicles 25**).

They are seated on thrones, indicating they are rulers and judges, both functions that have been promised to believers (not to Israel). We will not only be part of the judgment of the world but of angels as well:

²Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! (**1 Corinthians 6:2,3**) [ESV]

We will also rule with Christ:

²⁰Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years (**Revelation 20:6**) [ESV]

"**With golden crowns on their heads**" – There are two types of crowns spoken of in the New Testament. The first is from the Greek word *diadēma*, which is a crown of authority, a ruler's crown. Technically, a *diadema* (from *dia*, meaning "around" and *deō*, meaning "to bind") refers to a strip of cloth tied around the head as a symbol of royal dignity.

The second type of crown mentioned in the New Testament is from the Greek word *stephanos*, which is from the root *stephō*, meaning “to twine” or “to wreath.” This is often referred to as a victor’s crown. This is the type of crown (typically a plaited wreath) that was awarded to the winners of athletic events by the judge of the games. These crowns are most likely presented at the *bematos*, or Bema Seat.

The word in the current verse that is translated “crown” is *stephanos*, which is another indication that these 24 elders represent the church as we are promised *stephanos* crowns when we appear at the bema seat (see study of judgments.)

“**White garments**” – This is another indication that the elders are members of the church. Although angelic beings are sometimes depicted as wearing white clothing, in **Revelation 3:5** the overcomers (all Christians) will have white garments.

⁵The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments (**Revelation 3:5**) [ESV]

Revelation 4:5

⁵**From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God,**

“**flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder**” – This is an indication of the majesty (**Exodus 19:16** and **Ezekiel 1:13**) and judgment of God (**Revelation 8:5, 16:18**).

“**before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God**” – As we discussed in the previous chapter, this is representative of the Holy Spirit. However, unlike the lampstands (Greek *luchnias*) mentioned in **Revelation 1:12, 13**, these are outdoor touches, literally “**torches of fire burning**” (*lampades puros kaiomenai*) indicative of judgment as in **Nahum 2:3, 4**.

“John’s vision depicts God as ready to make war on sinful, rebellious mankind, and the Holy Spirit as His war torch. The Comforter of those who love Christ will be the Consumer of those who reject Him.” (MacArthur, 2005)

Revelation 4:6-8

⁶**and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"**

“**Four living creatures**” – The word translated “living creatures” is the Greek word *zoa*, meaning “living ones,” not masculine, not feminine, but neuter. Some translations have this as “four beasts” but the word for “beast” (as used to describe the antichrist) is *therion*, meaning “a beastly wild animal” which is not used in this verse.

And I saw a **beast** [*therion*] rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. (**Revelation 13:1**) [ESV]

In **Ezekiel 1:4-25**, in his vision by the river Chebar, Ezekiel gives a detailed description of similar angelic creatures and in **Ezekiel 10:15** he specifically identifies them

And the cherubim mounted up. These were the living creatures that I saw by the Chebar canal. (**Ezekiel 10:15**) [ESV]

The cherubim were first mentioned in **Genesis 3:24** where they were placed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden to prevent anyone from entering there after the fall of Adam and Eve. Satan is one of the cherubim, a magnificently beautiful creature, in fact “perfect in beauty” according to **Ezekiel 28:12-14** (metaphorically here called the King of Tyre.)

¹²Son of man, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and say to him, Thus says the Lord GOD: "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. ¹³You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. ¹⁴You were an **anointed guardian cherub**. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. (**Ezekiel 28:12-14**) [ESV]

According to Ezekiel’s description, however, the cherubim had four wings, whereas the creatures identified here in **Revelation 4:8** have 6 wings like the creatures identified in **Isaiah 6:1-3**

¹In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (**Isaiah 6:1-3**) [ESV]

These creatures, according to Isaiah, are seraphim whose responsibility (both in Isaiah and here in Revelation) it is to proclaim God’s holiness. Thus, the four living creatures of **Revelation 4:6** most likely are seraphim.

Revelation 4:9 – 11

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ¹¹"Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

When the four living ones announce God’s holiness, the 24 elders (the redeemed ones in God’s church) fall down before him and cast their crowns at his feet.

The purpose of casting the crowns at the Lord’s feet is to show that He is really the one who deserves the rewards, not them. Remember that these crowns were awarded to members of the church for good works which they had done. Here, they are proclaiming that even though they are the ones who did the good works, the credit even for these deeds goes to God alone!

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