

Lesson 13

Chapter 4

Revelation 4:1

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.

We should all pause for just a moment to thank God that heaven has a **door**! And we should be thankful that heaven's door is an **open** door! Jesus Christ opened that door for us! McGuiggan says he's glad it's not a window! It's not just for **looking** through. It's for **walking** through!

Chapters 4 and 5 go together, and together they set the stage for all that follows. McGuiggan makes a great point here. He says that the central message of Chapters 4 and 5 is found in John 14:1, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me."

- In Chapter 4, we are told to believe in God. In Chapter 5, we are told to believe also in Jesus.
- In Chapter 4, we see the power of God. In Chapter 5, we see the love of God.
- In Chapter 4, we see God as Creator and King. In Chapter 5, we see God as Redeemer.
- In Chapter 4, we see God far above all human interference. In Chapter 5, we see God made vulnerable but victorious.

- In Chapter 4, God draws aside the curtain of heaven and gives to John a vision of the majestic throne of the Ruler of the Universe.

This voice in verse 1 is the same voice that John heard in 1:11 (“as of a trumpet”), which means that this is again the voice of Christ.

John sees an open door, but John is not invited just to **look** in through the door but he is invited to **enter** through the door.

We have already seen two earlier doors in our study of Revelation. The church at Philadelphia had an open door set before them in 3:8, and the Laodiceans closed their door in Jesus’ face in 3:20 — but Jesus continued to stand at that door and knock!

In 1:19, Jesus told John to “write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.” In verse 1 here Jesus tells John that he is about to see “things which must be hereafter.” In both cases, the word “hereafter” seems to be in contrast to the letters in Chapters 2-3, which showed the present condition of those congregations.

How long “hereafter”? Verse 1 of Chapter 4 doesn’t tell us, but verses 1 and 3 of Chapter 1 tell us it would be soon (as do 22:6, 22:10, 22:12, and 22:20). Let’s keep our all-important time frame in mind as we begin Chapter 4.

We are about to see in this vision prophecies of events that will occur on earth. Verse 1 tells us that these events on earth have their origin in heaven! The true view of history is the view from the throne of God, and that is the view that John is about to see.

“I will show thee,” Jesus says in verse 1. From the very first verse of this great vision starting in Chapter 4, God is inviting us to see things as He sees them. We are being asked to see things with spiritual eyes. If we ever want to truly understand something, we need to let Jesus show that thing to us.

In verse 1, John is told to come up hither. That command is directed to John, not to the entire church. Why is that distinction important? Because premillennialists teach that verse 1 is describing the secret rapture of the church. It’s so secret it’s found nowhere in the Bible! It’s certainly found nowhere in verse 1. That command to come hither is directed to John in the first century, **not** to the church at the end of the world.

Revelation 4:2-3

2 And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. 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 scene of heaven opened and God upon the throne was said by George Frideric Handel to have been the inspiration for his famous *Messiah* oratorio.

In John 1:18, the apostle wrote: “No one has seen God at any time.” In Exodus 33:20, God said to Moses: “You cannot see My face; for no man can see Me and live.” In 1 Timothy 6:16 we read of the one “who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see.”

How then could John have seen God? The answer is given in the opening part of verse 2 – John “was in the Spirit.” He was experiencing a spiritual vision just as had been experienced by Isaiah and Ezekiel before him. John was not seeing God with his physical eyes but rather with his spiritual eyes.

John not only sees the throne, but he sees the one seated upon the throne. Ezekiel described the occupant of the throne in Ezekiel 1:26 as having “a likeness as the appearance of man,” but John portrays no form. The text makes no attempt to describe God in any human shape. Instead the throne’s occupant is described in terms of brilliant light cast from precious stones.

In verse 2 we see another important theme of the book of Revelation — **Behold, a throne!**

The word “throne” is found thirty nine times in the book of Revelation, more times than in any other book of the Bible. It is found seventeen times just in Chapters 4 and 5 — which is more times than the word appears in the rest of the New Testament. The “One seated on the throne” is John’s favorite description of God. Verse 8 will confirm that the occupant of this throne is the Lord God Almighty.

The message is clear — **the throne that rules the world is *not* in Italy. It’s not in Rome.** This vision begins with a clear depiction of the absolute sov-

ereignty of God. All things must be viewed with regard to their relation to the throne of God. **If we want to see things as they really are, we need to view them from the perspective of the throne of God.**

Psalm 47:8 — God reigneth over the heathen: God sitteth upon the throne of his holiness.

Rome thought it was all very impressive. The Roman emperors thought that they too were very impressive, with all of their pomp and pageantry. The city of Rome was filled with impressive palaces and imperial buildings. And it was all nothing. In fact, it was all less than nothing when compared with the throne of God and the worship of God in the heavenly court.

Caesar did not create anything. Caesar was not eternal; he was created. Caesar did not redeem anyone with his blood. Caesar had no hope to offer because Caesar himself had no hope, being without God in the world.

The book of Revelation has a question for the emperor of Rome — where are your clothes! In truth, the emperor has no clothes. And just like the little girl in that story, Christians need to have the courage to proclaim that truth to the world, both then and now — the emperor has no clothes! He may look impressive, and he may act like he has much to offer — but all he has are empty promises! And that is true of anything or anyone that would seek to share the throne of God.

What about the stones mentioned in verse 3? Jasper is a translucent rock crystal. Carnelian (KJV: sardine) is a blood red stone that is also called sardius after the city of Sardis where it is found. In Exodus 28:17, these stones are in the breastplate of the high priest. Perhaps the white jasper represents God's holiness and righteousness, while the red sardius denotes his judgments. This view would fit nicely with Psalm 89:14, where we read that righteousness and judgment are the foundation of God's throne.

Many commentators get bogged down trying to find elaborate meanings in details of this book such as the choice of stones. And, without denying there may very well be an elaborate meaning to some or all of these details, we need to remember that this book has rightly been called an oil painting from God. Revelation is intended to have an *emotional* impact on the reader. That impact is obscured when we focus unduly on the brush strokes. Here is how one commentator described Chapter 4:

This vision is filled with movement and sounds and color. The vision is a flood of Old Testament symbols and experiences from

Old Testament prophetic and apocalyptic visions. ... What is important for those who read this text is to sense and feel the color, movement, and wonder of the total scene. Individual parts in themselves are baffling, but the large scene is what we must try to see.

Listen to what Hailey says on this point:

To the literalistic mind, lacking the power of imagination, Revelation will forever be a sealed book; to the speculative and visionary mind the book will provide fuel to inflame far-fetched assumptions and conjectures which totally miss the truth. But to the mind prepared by the rest of the Bible for reality in picture and action, impressions of truth will be made that give strength for victory in every conflict of life.

As with the parables, many of the minor descriptive details may not be intended to carry a special significance of their own. Here the details serve to paint a vivid picture of beauty and majesty. Later we will find vivid pictures of horror and death.

Remember that John was standing before the throne of God! Do we really think that John was puzzling over why the stones were white?

In verse 3 we see a rainbow that is around the throne. Ezekiel also saw a rainbow:

***Ezekiel 1:28** — As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake.*

We are also reminded of Psalm 104:

***Psalm 104:2** — Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain.*

Why a rainbow? It certainly adds to the beauty of the scene, but the rainbow is also a reminder — a reminder of God's mercy and a reminder that God keeps his covenants.

Very soon we will see in this visions some terrifying judgments directed in particular against Rome and directed in general against any who would persecute God's people. And this rainbow is also a reminder that God's goal here is not to destroy his creation but is rather to save it.

A quick aside here: It has been rightly observed for millennia that homosexual behavior is a **corrupting** and **corrosive** influence in any society. When I see evidence of that corruption today, I think of a verse from Titus.

Titus 1:15 — Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.

That verse tells us that those who are defiled will seek to corrupt **anything**. And we see much of that corruption in the world around us today, including, for example, their corruption of the marriage bond. But, as bad as that is, there is another thing they have corrupted that in my mind is just as bad — the homosexuals have corrupted the **rainbow** by hijacking it to become their own symbol!

Not long ago, the White House was lit in rainbow colors — not to celebrate the mercy and the covenants of God — but to celebrate gay marriage. **How far have we fallen!** You have to be pretty far gone to corrupt a rainbow, but they have managed to do it! “Unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure.” Including rainbows!

But despite what man may attempt to do it, the beautiful rainbow of God will forever remain a sign in the sky that **God keeps his promises** — and that fact should be a particularly important thing to remember for anyone marching under a rainbow in a gay pride parade! How can they ever claim ignorance of that fact that God does what he says when they have marched under a **rainbow** — **the very symbol of God's faithfulness to his covenants!** We can think about that the next time we have their rainbow flag waved in our faces.

Now back to our regularly scheduled Bible class!

Revelation 4:4

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.

These twenty-four elders appear several times in the book of Revelation. Here in Chapter 4 and later in Chapter 14 they sit around the throne of God. In Chapters 4, 5, 7, 11, 14, and 19, they worship and praise God. Who are they? What or whom do they represent? Let's consider the clues.

Our first clue is that they are wearing golden crowns. These crowns tell us that the twenty-four elders represent someone or something that is royal. Yes, they are sitting around the throne of God, which tells us that they are not ruling over anything by their own might or power, but they are shown here as rulers. In fact, that they are shown as **sitting** (rather than standing) around the throne of God further emphasizes their royal nature in verse 4. So the twenty-four elders represent someone or something that is royal.

Our second clue is that they are clothed in white garments. Revelation 19:8 tells us what this means: "And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: **for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.**" White garments are pure garments. Remember Revelation 3:4 — "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have **not defiled their garments;** and **they shall walk with me in white:** for they are worthy." So the twenty-four elders represent someone or something that is pure and unblemished.

Our third clue comes from the number twenty-four, and what that number represented under the old covenant. First Chronicles 24:1-19 tells us that there were twenty-four orders in the Levitical priesthood. Thus, these twenty-four elders represent someone or something that had a priestly role.

Our fourth clue also comes from the number twenty-four, which is twelve times two. The number twelve is a symbol for the people of God, both under the old covenant, with the twelve tribes, and under the new covenant, with the twelve apostles. Why twenty-four here rather than twelve? Perhaps because these twenty-four elders are intended to represent the people of God under both the old and the new covenant. That is, these twenty-four elders depict **all** of God's people with no one left out.

So let's review our clues. The twenty-four elders represent something that is royal, something that is pure, something that is priestly, and something that includes all of God's people, with no one left out. If anyone is still puzzling

over what this is, then we need a review starting all the way back in Daniel!

The twenty-four elders represent the church!

1 Peter 2:9 — But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Ephesians 5:27 — That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

Acts 2:47 — And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

The church is a royal priesthood. The church is without spot or blemish. The church includes all of God's people, with no one left out. Who else could these twenty-four elders possibly represent? They represent the church of Christ — the eternal kingdom made without hands.

The church of Christ is a royal priesthood, just as Christ himself is both our King and our High Priest. When we studied Zechariah 6:9-15 we saw the High Priest being crowned, something that could only happen after the Old Law had passed away. The church is a royal priesthood.

Let's pause for another quick aside — this time about the number **two**. We are going to see that number several times in this book, and sometimes its appearance will be a bit subtle — as it is here in that twenty-four is twelve times two. Why, we asked, was the number for God's people multiplied by two? Although the number two in this book is easy to overlook (as I largely did the first three times I taught this book), after further study I think the usage of two in this book is an important symbol. Why?

First, think about the themes we have seen so far: Caesar or Christ? Life or death? Man's view or God's view? Old or new? Throne of God or throne of Satan? Each of those themes can be expressed as a **choice** between **two** things. We either choose one or we choose the other. I think that one reason we see the number two in this book is that it is a reminder of the choice we all have to make, and in particular it is a reminder of the choice the first century Christians had to make — a choice that in their case could lead to a quick execution.

But second, there is something about Rome itself that should resonant with the number two. In fact, in Revelation 13 we will see Rome represented as two

beasts — a beast from the sea and a beast from the earth. What is it about Rome that would cause God to depict it as **two beasts**? Romulus and Remus.

Since ancient times, the image of the twins brothers Romulus and Remus being suckled by a she-wolf has been a symbol of the city of Rome and the Roman people. According to Roman mythology, Romulus killed Remus and then went on to found the city of Rome and the Roman Kingdom. Coins minted at the time of this book showed the twins living as two beasts, being nursed by a wolf.

As we work our way through this book, let's be on the lookout for other uses of the number two. Each time it appears it is a reminder of the themes we are seeing in this amazing book.

Revelation 4:5-6a

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. 6a And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal:

Verse 5 continues with John's incredible vision of God's throne.

Thunder and lightning and voices are commonly used to depict God's wrath and his power to judge. Recall, for example:

***Exodus 19:16** — And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that **there were thunders and lightnings**, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and **the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud**; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.*

***Psalms 18:12-14** — At the brightness that was before him his thick clouds passed, hail stones and coals of fire. **The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Highest gave his voice**; hail stones and coals of*

fire. Yea, he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; and he shot out lightnings, and discomfited them.

Psalm 77:18 — The voice of thy thunder was in the heaven: the lightnings lightened the world: the earth trembled and shook.

Thunder and lightning also serve another purpose in this book — they are used to announce things of unusual importance in the book. For example, thunder and lightning precede:

- The breaking of the seventh seal in 8:5.
- The blowing of the seventh trumpet in 11:19.
- The pouring of the seventh bowl of wrath in 16:18.

Here the thunder and lightning announce the entirety of the great vision that John is about to see and record.

The “seven lamps of fire burning before the throne” are “the seven Spirits of God.” We talked about that image before. The seven Spirits of God most likely represent the Holy Spirit, with “seven” being used as a symbol for the perfection of the Spirit. After the seven letters in Chapters 2-3, the number seven here may also be a reminder that what follows is being done for the church.

Verse 6 introduces yet another recurring theme in the book of Revelation — **the sea**. The word “sea” occurs twenty six times in the book of Revelation. As with the word “throne,” we need to pay close attention to the word “sea.”

What does the sea represent in the Bible?

First, the sea depicts separation. In Solomon’s temple a sea stood between the priest and the holy place where God dwelt (2 Chronicles 4:2-6). That there is a sea before the throne of God is a reminder that God is the creator and we are the creation. The sea is a reminder, as Swete wrote, of “the vast distance which, even in the case of one who stood in the door of heaven, intervened between himself and the throne of God.”

Yes, God longs to dwell with men, and God does dwell with men in the church. And yes, Christ, the perfect Son of God, walked among us. And yes, we can boldly approach the throne of grace through Christ (Hebrews 4:16). But, we must never forget that we are but dust, and that it was God our creator who breathed life into that dust. There is forever a vast distance between the Cre-

ator and his creation, and if God did not traverse that vast distance on our behalf it would never be traversed.

The image of a separating sea was an image that must have struck home with John! He was in exile on an island.

In addition to separation, the sea is used in the Bible to represent something else — the wicked.

Isaiah 57:20-21 — But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.

The sea in Revelation is often a reservoir of evil. For example, it is out of the sea that the terrible seven-headed blasphemous beast of Chapter 13 will arise.

But the sea before the throne of God is not a restless and troubled sea full of blasphemous beasts — instead, it is a **calm** sea. Verse 6 describes it as a sea of glass. A calm sea of glass depicts God's power over the wicked. He can take their wild and restless sea, with all of its mire and dirt, and turn it into a sea of glass.

So the sea here in verse 6 depicts the transcendence of God over his creation, and it depicts God's power over the wicked.

When we get to the end of this book, here is what we will find:

Revelation 21:1 — And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

No more sea means no more separation and no more wicked. When will that great day come? Perhaps it's already here! How many wicked people are in the body of Christ? And how much separation is there in the body of Christ between God and his people? More on that when we get to Chapter 21. Meanwhile, let's be on the lookout for the word "sea" in this book.

Revelation 4:6b-8

6b and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. 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. 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.

As with the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures that we meet here in Chapter 4 will reappear later in the book. We will see them again in Chapters 5, 6, 7, 14, 15, and 19.

Who are the four living creatures? They may be the **cherubim**. In the Old Testament, God was pictured as sitting enthroned above the cherubim that sat atop the ark of the covenant, and God was often addressed that way in prayer.

*2 Kings 19:15 — And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord, and said, O Lord God of Israel, **which dwellest between the cherubims**, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth.*

*Psalm 99:1 — The Lord reigneth; let the people tremble: **he sitteth between the cherubims**; let the earth be moved.*

We are also told that the cherubim are God's chariot on which he rides swiftly to judgment — an image that is particularly appropriate in the context of Revelation Chapter 4.

Psalm 18:10 — And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind.

Another place we see God riding upon the cherubim is in Ezekiel 10 — and there we find a similar description to what we see here in Revelation 4:7.

Ezekiel 10:14-16 — And every one had four faces: the first face was the face of a cherub, and the second face was the face of a man, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle. And the cherubims

were lifted up. This is the living creature that I saw by the river of Chebar. And when the cherubims went, the wheels went by them: and when the cherubims lifted up their wings to mount up from the earth, the same wheels also turned not from beside them.

Where Revelation 4:7 has a lion, a calf, a man, and an eagle, Ezekiel 10:14 has a cherub, a man, and lion, and an eagle.

We find something similar in Isaiah 6, but there we see not the cherubim but the **seraphim**.

Isaiah 6:1-3 — In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

The seraphim are mentioned only by Isaiah. They may be the same as the cherubim, with the name “seraphim” being used by Isaiah to describe their dazzling appearance.

There are differences among the descriptions of the seraphim in Isaiah 6, the cherubim in Ezekiel 10, and the beasts in Revelation 4. For example, Isaiah’s seraphim have six wings; Ezekiel’s cherubim have four wings; John’s beasts have six. Ezekiel’s cherubim have four faces each; John’s beasts have one face each. (And as for the “beasts” in the KJV being used to describe angelic beings, a better translation is “living creatures” as we find in the ASV. A different Greek word is used for the “beasts” of Chapter 13.) Despite these differences in their descriptions, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 10, and Revelation 4 are most likely just using slightly different figurative language to depict the same beings surrounding the throne of God.

Why are they around the throne of God? What is their purpose? The purpose of the cherubim is to defend God’s holiness. They kept Adam from the tree of life in Genesis 3:24. They were woven into the veil in Exodus 26:31 that stood between man and the presence of God in the temple. They stood over the ark of the covenant in Exodus 25:22 looking down upon the law of God, ready to

demand immediate justice were it not for the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat.

Exodus 25:20 — And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be.

These four living creatures are the judge of all who would enter the presence of God. They are endlessly concerned with God's reputation and the vindication of his character. Day and night, they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come."

Proverbs 14:34 tells us that "righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people." Where does America lie on that spectrum? I think we would all agree that we are on a rather swift decline, but how far have we fallen?

In 1939, a single four-letter word in the movie "Gone With the Wind" became a national scandal. Today, less than eighty years later, God's name is regularly blasphemed by that same Hollywood in ways that defy belief and imagination — yet few raise any objection. "Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?" (James 2:7). They most definitely do.

Think of the four living creatures in verse 8 the next time you hear someone use the name of God in vain. They are watching, and they are listening! They are full of eyes within, verse 8 tells us. They miss nothing. Night and day, without rest, they say, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty." And one day, all of those who use Jesus' name as a curse word will stand before them as they hear their judgment pronounced.

Back to verse 7, why are the four living creatures shown as a lion, a calf (or ox), a man, and an eagle?

Some suggest they depict nobility (the lion), swiftness (the eagle), strength (the ox), and wisdom (the man). Barclay says, "the four living creatures stand for everything that is noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in nature. Each has the preeminence in his own particular sphere." In this way, the four living creatures would together represent all of God's creation worshiping and praising God the Creator.

Psalms 19:1-2 — The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto

day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.

Why are there **four** creatures? The number four confirms our understanding that the focus here is on the creation of God worshipping the Creator.

The number four denotes the created world — the **four** elements (earth, air, fire, water), the **four** seasons, the **four** directions. In fact, our DNA (designed and encoded by God) consists of **four** chemical bases: A, G, C, and T. Four is the number of creation, perhaps because it is the sum of one with the divine number three.

What we see in these verses is the **opposite** of what we see in Romans 1:25, which describes those who “worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator.” Here we see God’s creation worshipping the Creator.



If you have seen many stained glass windows or other religious artwork (as shown on the handout available at www.ThyWordIsTruth.com), then you have seen these four living creatures representing the four gospel writers. The first such identification dates all the way back to AD 170 with Irenaeus. Augustine identified Matthew with the lion because he depicted Jesus as the Lion of Judah, Mark with the man because he showed the humanity of Christ, Luke with the ox because he showed Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for all, and John with the eagle because the eagle is the only creature that can look straight into the sun. Others identify Matthew with the man and Mark with the lion.

Here is the message of these verses to the church in a nutshell: You think Rome is powerful and impressive? Just look at who we have on our side! Rome does not stand a chance!