

Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb
Before the Throne
Revelation 4:1-11

Text:

¹ After 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.”

² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³ And 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.

⁴ Around 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.

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, 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: ⁷ the 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. ⁸ And 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!”

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the 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.”

Introduction:

It is paramount this morning that you get a right perspective of the presence of the Almighty. If you could catch a glimpse right now into the very throne room of God how do you think you would describe that sight? In a word, I think it would be awesome.

Now, in my opinion, I think that our culture is in the process of changing the meaning of the word “awesome.” What does the word mean today in popular usage? Isn’t it used to describe something thrilling? “That was awesome.” Listen to teenagers getting off a rollercoaster – “That was awesome, dude!”

A few weeks ago, Phil Harkleroad gave me an opportunity to go up in a KC-135 Stratotanker to observe a mid-air re-fueling mission of four or five A-10 Thunderbolt fighter jets. When I got off the plane, Phil asked me what I thought. I said, “That was awesome!” What I meant was that experience was a once-in-a-lifetime thrill.

The words “awe” or “awesome” do not really mean thrilling in their original usage, however. To be struck with awe really means to be struck with fear. But you know I do not mean fear in the sense of frightened but in the sense of splendor. What do you think when you are observing a thunderstorm laden with cloud-to-ground lightening? Is there not a bit of fear in the back of your mind? Imagine that you are a storm-chaser on the path of a F-5 tornado. There may be a sense of thrill in the chase but there is also a healthy amount of respect for the strength of the storm. That sense of respect is a kind of fear. I was observing a horse-trainer while visiting my parents in Colorado. I noticed how the man had total control of the animal in his presence, but he also kept assuring us that at any moment this horse could kill him, so great was its strength. When you observe a lightning storm – awesome. When you chase a tornado – awesome. When you see a wild animal – awesome. When you encounter God – what word should we use? For even the word “awesome” seems so weak.

Revelation 4-5 are to be taken as a unit. They are programmatic for the rest of the book of Revelation. They portray a carefully devised plan that will be carried out from heaven’s control room – the very throne-room of God himself. First, we need to encounter command central. Then we need to see that there is a central purpose behind all that God does. Encountering command central will be chapter 4 and encountering the central purpose will be chapter 5. So keep in mind that chapters 4-5 are one unit divided into two parts. The chapter division is correct. Chapter 4 will set the stage for the drama and chapter 5 will describe the purpose of the drama. Chapters 6-22 will then be the drama enacted.

Another thing to note here at the outset is that the use of the word “throne” is obviously meant to convey an idea of control. God is seated in the heavens he does what ever he pleases (cf. Psalm 115:3; 135:6-7). Nothing happens in heaven or earth that is not a part of God’s intention. Nothing can get slipped by him. This is what we mean when we speak of the absolute sovereignty of God. Absolutely everything is under his carefully devised plan – EVERYTHING!

Ask yourself right now at the outset of this study: “Do I believe this?” “Do I really believe that everything flows from the hand of a divine God who is seated on a throne carefully bringing about everything that happens as though it were a part of his well-written drama?”

This is fundamental to the book of Revelation because later we are going to read about beasts, dragons, demons and harlots who are ruthlessly persecuting the church. We are going to read about be-headed martyrs and slain Christians. Is their death, their loss of life and loss of head under the carefully devised plan of the Almighty? What if it were your head being threatened? What if it were the head of your child? Could you believe that absolutely everything was in God’s plan?

This is the point of Chapters 4-5 and it sets the stage for the book as a whole. So let us first encounter God's throne. What words could we use to describe this glorious room – the throne-room of God?

Vv. 1-2 form a kind of introduction:

¹ After 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.”** ² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.

“After this” simply means “now that you have seen the vision of the churches, let me show you the next vision.” The very same trumpet-like voice that he had heard in chapter 1 introducing the first vision, now introduces the second vision. This voice is clearly the voice of the Lord Jesus calling him up to see what must take place now that the first vision has been concluded.

John says that at once he was in the Spirit and given a glimpse into heaven itself. We do not need to get too bogged down in whether or not John was really caught up into heaven in the body or out of the body because it simply is not stated. We do know that this vision had a profound effect on John, however.

He saw the very throne of God – not that God actually sits on a throne because God does not have a body. These descriptions are John's best effort to describe what is indescribable.

In fact, let's make a couple of observations. The first one is just this:

1. The majesty of the Almighty is ineffable (v.3)

The first thing you are supposed to notice about this description of what John saw is that it is virtually impossible to describe what he saw. I want you to use this old word – ineffable. It simply means indescribable. And it is not simply that human words are too limited, or that language is insufficient, though that is part of the problem. The ineffable majesty of the Almighty is much deeper than our limited language; it has to do rather that our understanding is too limited. You see, we simply do not have the categories for comprehending heaven and God.

There is nothing literal about anything written in this passage, is there? Does God, who is a spirit, really sit on a throne? IS there a literal and real rainbow that surrounds him? Certainly not! These are simply an effort to bring something of the reality into our categories. This is what we would call in theology an anthropomorphism – describing the almighty in human terms.

Try to describe electricity to a native people in the bush. Where would you start?

Do you see? When we read the book of Revelation with its apocalyptic symbolism, we are not supposed to get bogged down in finding a one-to-one correspondence with the symbols. Instead we are to see the theological truth being conveyed with the symbolism. So when you read that the appearance of God was like jaspers and carnelians and rainbows, you are supposed to read that as utterly indescribable. Is that right?

2. The Almighty God is unapproachable (v.4)

⁴ Around 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.

You are supposed to see that that are thrones above thrones above thrones until finally you come to the throne. Not only is God's throne central with 24 thrones around his own; there are many levels of thrones. There are the seven spirits represented by seven burning torches that surround the throne. Then there are the four living creatures that are on the four corners of the throne. If you want to get to God, you have to go through the 24 then the seven then the four before you see him. This God is unapproachable.

You can get to me quite easily.

Can you imagine trying to get to the president? How many people would you have to go through before you really got to him?

But there is much more to this description of an unapproachable God. Look at the first part of v.5:

⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder...

Everything about this description says that there is a vast distancing between man and God. You don't just saunter into his presence. Can you imagine trying to saunter into the presence of a God who sits on a throne where there are constant flashes of lightning, a continual rumble of thunder with an occasional ear-piercing clap of thunder?

Cf. Exodus 19:18f.

Awesome and terrifying. Resplendent and transcendent. This is the unapproachable God.

There is another level to this description found at the beginning of v.6.

⁶ and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

What are we to make of this sea of glass like crystal?

The sea is a common symbol used throughout the book. The beast will come out of the sea later on in ch.13. The dragon will stand upon the sea in ch.12. For the Jews, the sea was a picture of endless chaos and constant trouble. It will be used in the book of Revelation to depict all things earthly and worldly. It is a picture of the earth under the Fallen order. The triumph will come in the new heaven and the new earth when the first heaven and the first earth will have passed away and there will be no more sea (cf. 21:1). It seems as though here in ch.4 John is being shown that there is no approaching this God who is on the other side of the Fallen order. He is surrounded by Terror-striking splendor and order after order of heavenly functionaries. He is quite simply unapproachable.

That created a huge problem for mankind – unless God chooses to do something. We will see that in ch.5.