

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF HEAVEN

Revelation 4

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I. Before we begin looking at the text, I must share with you that I have really debated for a number of weeks as to whether or not we should continue past chapter 3 in the Book of Revelation.

Part of me says no. There are reasons I have heard for not going on as a Sunday morning series. We'll run into problems because Revelation is not a practical applicable book like for example 1 Corinthians. Also it's so difficult. Everyone has their own idea of what it means. Therefore what we're going to get into is a lot of conflicting views of interpreting Revelation. It's very potentially divisive therefore. I realize that all of these are valid objections that might be raised against going on in Revelation and probably I will get into a lot of trouble as I go through and try to share with you honestly what I understand the Scripture to be saying. Yet, as I looked at these kinds of arguments for not continuing in Revelation, I couldn't help but be overweighed by the reasons that came to me for continuing from chapter 4 on.

A. For one thing all Scripture is profitable, Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16, and is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (NIV). That means as we approach any part of the Word we do not approach it just from the standpoint of what is the meaning involved here: "What did the writer mean to say and what did the early Christians understand him to say?" But we're asking "What does it mean to me now?" If the Lord had not wanted this book to speak to us, then He would not have given us any particular part of it. I'm just foolish enough to believe that we can open any part of God's Word and if our hearts are open to the Lord, and if we've opened it in the Holy Spirit's timing, it will very powerfully speak

to us. I even believe that passages like Leviticus and 1 and 2 Chronicles and others of the more difficult parts of Scripture have profound messages from God that are intended to be shared.

We'll find this experience extremely profitable as we continue through Revelation.

Also Revelation is the only book in the Bible that specifically promises blessing to those who read it aloud, to those hear it being read aloud, and those who keep it. We recognize that all of the books of Scripture inherently carry this promise within themselves. But Revelation is the only book to explicitly state it. So we're going to have an opportunity over these next weeks as we continue in Revelation to prove for ourselves the validity of the blessing that occurs in our lives as we open this text.

B. I think also we need in this time to understand and to recover perhaps the understanding of what the early Christians understood this book to be saying. They did not have all of the prophetic books that are out on the market today. Nor did they have all of the headline newspaper events that we make a great deal of and there is now how we understand this passage. I have this kind of peculiar conception, and the church of the Lord throughout history has pretty much always shared this perspective of the Book of Revelation, that it was a book that the early Christians could understand, that they did not need some future event to understand it more clearly, that it spoke to them very powerfully in the midst of the life struggle that they were going through. The book often spoke in symbols. They were living in a totalitarian society where the book might be discovered and what were the meaning of things, how could they be couched in such a way so if it was found by an outsider they'd say, "We don't have the foggiest idea of what they're talking about." And indeed when an outsider picks up the Book of Revelation, he doesn't have the foggiest idea of what's going on. And many Christians don't have the foggiest idea of what is happening.

II. As we approach chapter 4 we begin the second vision of the book.

This vision will extend all the way through chapter 16.

The first vision was a vision of the Lord speaking to the seven churches. The second vision is vision of the process of judgment unfolding upon the world. There are four visions in total in the Book of Revelation.

In the first division we saw Jesus standing in the midst of His church on earth, speaking to each of His churches a word of personal insight to that church, a word of admonition. Now, as we approach chapter 4, we find that instead of Jesus being pictured in the midst of His church the author John is pictured as being caught up into heaven so that the scene rather than being on earth is now in heaven. Since John is called up into heaven to see what is going to take place, the first thing that confronts him is a vision of the throne and of those who are about the throne in Revelation 4 and 5. He is taken up with that vision. Chapter 4 really is a description of God the Father and chapter 5 is a description of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, about the throne of God. Through John we then see as the church into heaven, see something of the mystery now vanishing and we get a clearer understanding perhaps than we've ever had before as to the nature of God and the throne room of God. It is as though in Revelation 4 we have been ushered into the White House in World War II when Franklin D. Roosevelt used to go down to the map rooms in the command center and see how the war was going as the generals showed him the maps. He would have the world laid out on great wall and they would look and there would be various pins in different colors representing the troops of the enemy and the ships of the enemy and representing the troops and the ships of the allied forces.

In regard to those map rooms there are two kinds of techniques that can be employed in regard to showing strategy. One might be called descriptive symbolism in which the little items on the

map actually show where the enemy's troops are and where the allied troops are. But there's another kind of symbolism called determinative symbolism where the generals might just freely arrange the allied forces to show where they would like them to be, where they're going to be. Where they're going to be for example on D-Day on the Normandy beaches. And while the event had not yet occurred, the alignment on the map might show the determination of where events were happening.

As we open to the Book of Revelation and find ourselves in the throne room, in the map room that unfolds in heaven, we see what might be called determinative symbolism. The persecuted church on earth isn't able to see by its own sight what is going to happen. But the Lord has already entered a judgment and already determined that the end of history is going to have these certain kinds of consequences to it. So as we look we see what is being done from God's point of view about the earthly situation.

The church is to take comfort from how God has determined to gather things together.

III. John is called up through an open door to heaven.

There have been some previous open doors in the Book of Revelation. There has been the door of opportunity where the Lord says to the church of Philadelphia, "I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut" (Revelation 3:8, NIV). There's a door of opportunity the Lord wants us to go through. There is the open door of the heart, where the Lord says "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20, NIV).

But here we have the door of Revelation. There are some who believe that when John is caught up into heaven that he is kind of hinting that the whole church is caught up into heaven at this point. And from Revelation 4 on, the church is no longer present on earth because the church is

caught up into heaven. I have a little bit of problem making this particular text say that for several reasons. One is simply that the text itself says John was caught up into heaven. And the church isn't mentioned at all.

There are some who say, "The church isn't mentioned because it's absent from earth over the next number of chapters." But the omission of the word "church" may not necessarily mean that it isn't there. We find in 1 and 2 Peter that the word "church" is not mentioned. In Romans 1–15 we find that the word "church" is not mentioned. And that is no indication that the church may not be there. In fact, John four times in the Book of Revelation is caught up in the spirit. If therefore the church is caught up in 4:1 it must necessarily follow that every time John is caught up the church is caught up. And I don't think that any one of us would hold to viewpoint that the Lord is coming for the church four times.

John is in the spirit. As he is in the spirit, he sees things that cannot be seen from a normal human point of view.

IV. What does he begin to see as heaven's door is open to him?

A. First he begins to see in heaven a throne. This is so important because the word "throne" dominates the Book of Revelation. It's found in every chapter of the Book of Revelation except for two or three chapters. We must remember the life setting of the Early Church. As John writes this they are a very battered and beleaguered and persecuted church. And perhaps the last thing that they were expecting to see was the throne of God. Yet that's precisely the first thing which John and which believers everywhere are always called to see in reference to God: His throne, His center of power, the fact that God reigns and God rules.

Pilate once said to Jesus, "Do you refuse to speak to me?...Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not

given to you from above” (John 19:10–11, NIV). There is that recognition that what happens on earth happens by the will of God. That God is on the throne.

Christians sometimes use this phrase when things have gone real bad and they’re hoping that God is still on the throne. They say, “God is still on the throne.” There’s been part of me that’s never quite liked that phrase. One word I really don’t like. The word “still.” God is still on the throne. It gives the implication that after all that has happened, God almost got knocked off His throne, but He’s still hanging on. He’s still there, thank God. He didn’t leave it after all. Certain Revelation is such that He is on the throne. He never intended to leave. Never was in danger of losing His position. And He’s rooted firmly in His position as sovereign and majesty. Evil is not in control. He is on the throne. If we think back to the last message from Revelation, chapter 3, the letter to the church at Laodicea, here was a church that was promised that if they would come to Christ and let Him in they would ultimately sit on this very throne. They themselves would enjoy the blessing of dominion and power that the Lord God has.

B. The second thing that John sees in heaven, the second vision, which greets his eyes is the fact that there is One seated on the throne.

The throne is not empty. There is One there. He is described in very unusual terms. Like jasper and carnelian and emerald. If you were starting out to describe God and what He looked like I doubt that you would necessarily take these terms. We tend to think of God in terms of human description. Yet we know from Jesus’ own teaching in John 4:24 that “God is Spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (NIV). We’re commanded in the second commandment not to make any graven image of God because the personality and being of God is so vast and so great and so complex that it cannot be captured in a graven image. It cannot be captured in canvas and it cannot even be captured in the imagination.

What we have here is the one seated upon the throne. He is described in terms of stones. Really probably what is going on is that we're thinking of a Scripture that says God is light, and the phrase that Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:16 that God dwells in unapproachable light and as the throne is looked at, radiating from the throne is God in terms of descriptive qualities of light. In fact these stones represent various things: jasper, for example, which in our day is a dull opaque stone but then was a translucent rock through which light could shine and have the glistening quality of diamond. It may very well have been diamond reflecting the purity and radiance of God. The carnelian or the sardius stone was blood red and represented the justice or the judgment or the wrath of God. And about the throne either in terms of a rainbow arching over the throne or halo surrounding the throne is emerald which is green, indicating mercy. So the essence of God is seen in terms of His purity, His holiness, His radiance as well as His wrath, His judgment. Yet as a part of the essence of His being, His mercy. So about the throne is a ring of green.

This is all that John shares with us. And he doesn't really say a whole lot about it except the beauty is such as to dazzle him, to behold the face of God and to live was an incredible experience for him.

It's striking, by the way, as we look at these various stones that in the Old Testament on the breastplate or the square cloth that the high priest wore upon his chest symbolizing the idea that Israel was on the heart of the high priest and all of his prayers before God, the first stone representing the tribe of Reuben was sardius and the last stone on the breastplate was jasper.

These very stones represented here in the character of God. The fourth stone on the breastplate represented the tribe of Judah and was jasper or mercy signifying that God, when He detailed the order of the high priest's garb, chose to represent that quality of his character that is mercy be

represented in the fourth card, the tribe of Judah, from which Jesus himself would come. It's kind of a striking use of biblical symbolism.

God, John is saying, is vaster than we can describe, unapproachable, undescrivable, bigger than any concept than we have ever had.

C. The third thing that greets John's eyes are the twenty-four elders upon the throne.

Revelation 4:4 says they themselves have thrones. They are evidently to be seen as ruling because they have thrones. There's been a great deal of debate and we could spend the rest of the morning talking about whether these are humans or angels. There are some who feel these twenty-four elders represent the twelve patriarchs of the Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New Testament. Therefore it's the combined church of all ages worshipping the Lord. There's a lot to be said for that view.

Others, I'm one of them, see them as angels, as rulers in the heavens. Who, in the words of Colossians, are those who are called thrones, principalities and powers, that these are high angelic order. They seem to be in various places in Revelation distinguished from the redeemed. And also, if these were the apostles, it's funny that John would be on the outside looking in and would later call one of the elders "Sir." Their appearance is white clothes and golden crowns. They have had responsibilities, which had been given to them and rewards given them from God.

D. As they are there, John turns and sees again coming from the throne, lightning, thunder and seven torches of fire, which he says, are the seven spirits of God.

What is the purpose of the lightning and thunder? To represent for us the unapproachableness of the throne, that we in our mind are reliving an Old Testament scene of Exodus 19 when the law of God was given on Mount Sinai. There was lightning and thunder and flashes of fire saying to the people that it was an awesome God with which they had to deal and they better not touch the

mountain or come near it. The Holy Spirit is represented here as seven torches. This is a frequent term in Revelation describing the Holy Spirit. It's not meant to be literalized. The seven torches of fire represent the complete presence of the Holy Spirit and how as a torch he casts light for us upon the throne. It is the Holy Spirit that illuminates us to understand and to know God.

Complimenting this whole description as we see it now—we see a throne, we see one seated on the throne described in terms of dazzling colors, we see an emerald about the throne, we see twenty-four elders with their seats circling the throne, we see lightning and hear thunder and see seven torches of fire.

E. Then added from that backing away in all directions there is described a sea of glass like crystal. Here we're not meant to see something wavy like a sea but a pavement that is of glass. In New Testament times glass had a very poor quality to it. Most glass was very dull and even opaque. You couldn't see anything from it. Good glass was very expensive and was regarded as pure and sometimes even above the quality of gold. Here is described a glass that is pure as crystal. That is to say it stands so as to reflect everything upon it. If you have the imagination to think of the stereophonic sound and color of heaven, you see the lightning, the flashing, the thunder, the radiance of the colors being reflected in this shining pool of glass all about the throne.

It's interesting that the Koran relates the idea that when the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon she thought that a pavement of clear glass around Solomon's throne was water so she lifted up her skirt to pass through it. Legend shows that the clear glass was thought of as splendidly magnificent. A suitable paving for a royal court.

What is glass meant to convey? It's meant to convey the utter impossibility of venturing across that sea of glass. That in addition to the lightning and thunder that would scare us away from the

throne of God a shining sea bared all approaches over which no person can walk. So the first impression we get of God is His power, His holiness and His unapproachability.

F. Our vision continues. The four living ones are then seen. They're called in the King James Version "beasts." This is a very poor translation. They're not beasts at all. Probably the best rendering is simply to call them "living ones." The word "beasts" conveys something grotesque. But these are creatures, living ones. Even the language itself although it is very intriguing cannot possibly capture for us the beauty of this created order that God has made in the heavens.

General characteristics, full of eyes on the outside, may indicate their ability to keep track of everything. That part of the angelic creation that has an eye out for all that is happening around the universe and on the earth. Six wings, perhaps suspended, animated in space above the throne. Specific characteristics of them are given. They appear to be for us representative of the created order. They are a physical embodiment of characteristics, which we may not see. For example the lion is king among the wild beasts. That represents strength and majesty. So the first living one may be taken as a symbol of that. The ox is highest among domesticated animals and may represent patience and continuous labor. The man, highest of earth's creation, representing around the throne of God intelligence and rational power. And the eagle, highest of the birds, representing around the throne of God that which is lofty and swift.

So God has chosen in His throne room those beings to create that would represent back to Him qualities of His own nature and personality.

As we look at this scene further, now our ears begin to hear a song, which is being sung about the throne of God. There is the song of the living ones. The four living ones who sing continually in verse 8, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (NIV). This divine angelic quartet is forever involved in the singing of a hymn, which has praises to

God. The first praise is His holiness, the fact that indeed no one else is like Him. Second praise is to His great power and omnipotence, the fact that He is almighty. And the third praise is to His eternality. He who was and is and is to come. Emperors may pass away, the Roman Christians of the first century know. But, there is one who does not pass away, who is holy and in the heaven. The elders then join this song. There will be more songs as we go through Revelation. But, they precede their song by falling before God indicating a willingness to give back to the Lord all that He has given them. A marvelous model for human behavior to recognize that all we have can be given and must be if we're to be true worshippers, always be placed on the altar before Him, that we really have nothing of our own, that when we begin to exclude certain things that are ours from God we do not worship Him in spirit and in truth.

The elders praise Him for creation. "Worthy art thou O Lord to receive glory and honor and power, for thou has created all things and by thy will they existed and were created" (Revelation 4:11).

From the throne of God these elders were able to look out over the vast expanse of creation that God has made. We tend to see creation from the earth's point of view. How different it would be to see the created order from heaven's point of view. To recognize for example the incredible galaxies that God has made, and the fact that the galaxy to which we belong is only perhaps one of a hundred billion galaxies in all of space. It would take you ten billion years flying at the speed of 186,282 miles per second just to make it through our galaxy and when you got done with ours there was another hundred billion yet to go. To be somewhere about the throne of God, to be able to praise Him for all the vast complexity of His created work: the suns and the planet and the moons, the stars that He has made.

We're able to see about as much of the created universe as an amoeba can see of the ocean in which it drifts. How far can an amoeba drifting out here span the ocean? That's how far we can see of God's created universe. Here are beings who can see the whole expanse. So night and day an endless song before God, they're willing to join the chorus of praise to God, which praises Him for creation, the magnificent creation of God.

V. What are we to make of this vision that John has and how are we to apply it to our own daily life?

This is a question we must ask ourselves as we go through each chapter of Revelation. I have three questions to ask:

A. The first is this: "When crisis is breaking around me what do I see?" This question arises from the nature of the context in which the Book of Revelation is written. Here is the church facing a crisis, facing the fact that it may be martyred out of existence. When evil looks so very strong in the world, what do I see? Do I see the cause of Jesus Christ about to fail? Or do I see a throne above the earth and one sitting upon it? What do I see as a parent when my little baby dies of a tragic disease? What do I see when a marriage that I have worked to be cohesive and see it prosper and grow has come unstuck and unglued and life is coming apart around me? What do I see when my heart begins to fade and suddenly I am faced with that aspect of my existence, my frailty? What happens when the career that I had planned is stuck or maybe even canceled and I must be involved in doing something that I had really not wanted to do or planned to do at all? What happens when it looks like the financial reserves that I had carefully stashed away, to help me in the day that I would need them, suddenly have evaporated? And trouble descends upon me. What do I see in that moment of trouble?

The purpose of this Scripture is to say what we are to see. The thing we are to keep before us in our crises is a throne and God ruling on the throne and the omnipotent power of God with whom we have to relate who is unchanging and who will not fail us. Circumstances may fail. Ravages may come against us. But we meet and we serve a God who's great. A God who is all-powerful. A God except through Jesus Christ we could not approach at all because the shining sea bars all approaches.

What do we see in our moments of adversity? This Scripture is saying we are to see God upon His throne. We're to get caught up in the worship of heaven lest we focus upon our own failures and defects that we forget to understand the greatness of the power of God and that power as it may be available to us in our moment of need as well.

B. A second question I think we can draw off this passage is this: "Am I one who worships God? Or do I reserve worship of God until all my questions are answered?" There were many in the Early Church who were being persecuted for their faith. There were families who were wondering why we lost dad, why did the Lord allow this and another family was spared? We think of questions like, "The first thing I'm going to ask the Lord when I see him is...?" Revelation 4 lays all these things to rest. It is in effect saying the first instinct you will have when you actually see God is your questions will all be laid aside. You won't have the audacity to ask Him any question at all. Who are you to question God anyway? Your first response is to fall down and worship Him. It's only as you worship Him that you can begin to get the questions. If you're waiting to get the answers until you worship then the answers will never come. The biblical precedent is to begin to worship the Lord in the midst of your trouble and He will disclose himself to you and He will give you His way and His will and maybe some things won't be answered until we meet Him. But we don't have the audacity to stand before God, to put Him

in the witness box and say, “We want to cross examine you for a while. Why did you do this? Or that? Why did you allow...” We are creatures. We are mortal. Our function is to worship the God who is great and over all. It is as we worship Him that we find the release from our difficulties and from our questions.

So our instinct is not to worship. It’s not wrong to ask questions. We know that from the Book of Job. But there is a proper timing for questions and we do not rush into the presence of God as some careless tourist.

C. The third question we might ask of this passage is, “Will my sight of heaven be limited only to the words of the Bible? Will I actually see this myself?” You alone have the answer to that kind of a question. You’ve heard an explanation today of what is in Revelation 4. Something words can only begin to try to describe. Maybe my words and even John’s words are like an amoeba looking out on the ocean, the vastness and greatness of God’s personality. Through them it’s just a window through which we can peek on the glories, which are coming. But the redeemed, those who know Jesus Christ, are going to actually see this scene and participate in it. The nonredeemed are not going to participate in this scene. The only imagery of heaven the nonredeemed will ever have is this perspective of what did the Scriptures say.

So we have to ask this question: “Will your vision of heaven be only the one that is given in the Scripture? Or will it one day become personal for you as you stand in God’s presence?” There is certainly a day coming—Revelation speaks of this over and over again—we must learn through it our temporalness, the fact that we are here so very quick upon this earth and that we are called upon to relate forever to the sovereign God of all the universe, that we are somehow called to have fellowship with Him in spite of His dazzling radiance and purity, that somehow through Jesus Christ we have been made worthy so that the throne of God, which comes to us as so

awesome and so splendid, may actually because of Jesus Christ be called the throne of grace where we receive help in a time of trouble.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, as we come to You in this moment we would call to heart these questions which have been raised at the close of this message today. There are certainly some here, Lord, who are experiencing crisis in their life. In whom today You are calling to get a larger vision of what is happening. To say that though all around You is breaking up I'm not breaking up. I abide. I remain. And all who cast their care upon Me shall be established, for I will support you and I will be with you and I will give you power. There are some, Lord, who have had experiences happen in life which so severely wounded their spirit that they have never been able to worship You after that event. They still have been asking questions. Their questions have gone unresolved. Today out of the brilliance of Your personality and out of the great depths of Your love You are calling to us to begin again the first premise that we are called upon to worship You. That it is not given to us as mortals to understand everything that happens but that we have a single call upon our lives: to worship the Lord God with all our heart and with all our strength, with all our might (Mark 12:30). We are called to a singleness of purpose, which invites us to worship, knowing that as we worship there will be eventually the answer to our questions. May it be, Lord, that there would be none of us here today whose only vision of heaven would be through the pages of the Bible. May this be personal for us. The way of salvation that Jesus Christ has opened to us. He came from the throne of God and became a human and lived a sinless life, died death as punishment for our sins. And therefore took upon himself the sins that we would give to Him by way of our confession. He rose again from the dead demonstrating His power, ascended back into heaven where He now remains at the right hand of the throne until

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such time as He will come again for us (Hebrews 12:2). It is He in whom we put out trust today.
We praise thee that we know Thee, the only living and true God. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.