

Before the Throne of God

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Revelation 4:1-11

Well, today, we're back to the book of Revelation. Much of Revelation is a battle between the powers of evil and God's power. The readers of this book would have understood the wild images and message to be an encouragement to keep the faith. God is in charge, not the Roman emperor. All the military strength of Rome is no match for the power of God. In the past couple of chapters, we looked at the letters from Jesus Christ to seven churches. The letters had both positive things to say as well as challenges. Those who would be able to endure persecution without compromising their faith would receive blessings. We can learn a lot from those letters because we encounter similar challenges to our faith, today.

In today's chapter, John, the writer, gets a glimpse of the throne room of God, where heavenly worship is happening. There may be challenges happening in life, but God is still reigning, and in control. Before we get into the details, I'd just like to say that there are actually many different interpretations of the book of Revelation. I am explaining things from a "Believer's Church" perspective. This is a large group of churches that include Brethren in Christ, and Anabaptist/Mennonite churches, among others. Where possible, I'll try to include some of the other interpretations, since not all scholars agree. With today's story, there are some scholars who believe that when John was called to come up through the door to heaven, it's an illustration of a time when all the "good" people will be taken to heaven (the rapture). After this, they believe the "bad" people who remain will experience a time of hardships (tribulation), as described in later chapters. Many scholars see very little evidence of this kind of "rapture" in the book of Revelation, and I agree. The whole book of Revelation is addressed to churches, to the believers. If all the faithful Christians are taken to heaven and are gone for most of the book, this message to them doesn't make as much sense. Actually, right through the book, God's people are seen on the earth.

Anyway, John hears a voice like a trumpet inviting him to come up through a door, to see a vision of heaven. When a prophet hears a "voice like a trumpet" a divine message could be expected. John sees a vision of God seated on a throne. We are not told specifically what God looks like, other than images of precious stones, and light. Jasper is a transparent stone that can reflect bright light, like a diamond. It can symbolise God's purity. Carnelian is a fiery red stone that could symbolise God's wrath or judgement against evil. We also read about a sea that looks like glass or crystal in front of God's throne. One meaning for this crystal sea could be to show us that God is separate from humanity. There is a gap between us and God that is caused by sin. As we see in the words of those worshipping around God's throne, God is holy. "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come," they sing. God is holy, but we're not.

Many people see themselves as "good," but deep down we are all mixed up with the effects of sin in our lives. On the outside, we may not have broken the law, or killed someone, but how many of us can say we've never sinned through our thoughts? Jesus said that even if we haven't done something wrong, we could already sin in our hearts. In Mark 10:18 Jesus says, "No one is good except God, alone." Sometimes it's not easy to see where we fall short. For example, we may not realise how we often benefit from systems in society that are sinful. I'm reminded of the "Black lives matter" protests that many of us have heard about in the news. We may think, "Yes, some police are corrupt." But, the problem is much bigger than that. We are all part of systems in society that give privilege to some but not to others. It's hard not to look down on the poor, or the homeless, or people who are different from us, whether they have a different race, a different sexuality, or even a different faith. As a white male, here in Canada, I never really realised that all my life I've had an advantage over people with dark skin, or over indigenous people, or over those who don't speak English well. We believe that everyone has equal rights, but the reality is that we are all influenced by negative stereotypes of people who are different from us. Jesus cared for the people who had little power in society. In a similar way, we are

called to care for those who have less power or influence. I believe it's important to stand together with those who are calling for better treatment of those with dark skin, those who are indigenous, and others around us who are suffering. The place to start is to recognise that we, ourselves, may not be as good as we think we are... We are sinners. And, God and sin cannot mix. All sin needs to be punished because God is pure and just. But, if no one is good enough, how can we be a part of God's kingdom in heaven? It's only through the sacrifice of God's son Jesus, on the cross. If we accept the forgiveness now available to us, we become part of God's family.

Getting back to Revelation, around God's throne there are flashes of lightning, and thunder, representing God's power. In front of the throne are seven flaming torches, symbolizing the perfection and presence of the Holy Spirit. Some people who read this book become fearful because all they notice are images of God's judgement, and they fear that God will subject them to suffering because they are not good enough. Yet, we need to remember the fact that no one is good enough. We all need God's mercy and forgiveness. In today's chapter we learn more about God than the fearful qualities of God's great power, and holiness. We have the characteristics of God's purity and wrath in the Jasper and Carnelian gems, but if you'll remember, there was also a rainbow around the throne. The rainbow is a strong symbol of God's mercy. We first hear of a rainbow in the story of Noah and the ark. God puts a rainbow in the sky after saving Noah from the great flood. It was a sign of God's mercy, reminding humanity that God would never again destroy the earth with a flood. Here, we read that the rainbow was "like an emerald." A green rainbow! I'm not really sure how it looked, but green is a soothing colour. In Psalm 23, there's an image of God leading us as a shepherd leads his sheep, resting "in green pastures." So, along with images of God being holy, separate, pure, and wrathful, we have the rainbow of God's mercy and love surrounding everything!

Around God's throne, we have a sense of peace and control. Along with the green rainbow, the sea of glass could also represent a calming of the forces of chaos. The sea would normally have been a fearful image of the powers of evil, but here it has been calmed. Around God's throne, we read there are 24 elders, each seated on a throne. These likely represent the 12 tribes of Israel, and the 12 Apostles of Jesus, ruling together with God. They all have golden crowns. The word used for their golden crowns, means the kind of crown won in a victory, rather than the type of crown used for royalty. These elders were victorious in that they kept their faith, even through suffering and persecution.

The four living creatures on each side of God's throne could represent the complete physical universe, all living things. Traditionally, the number four symbolises the four directions, meaning everywhere – North, South, East, and West. It also symbolises the four gospels of Jesus Christ. Most likely the creature that looked like a lion represents the wild animals, the ox – domesticated animals, the one with a human face – humanity, of course. And, the one like a flying eagle would represent the birds. Covered with eyes, the four creatures could see all, and understand all things. They were connected with God, continually praising God, day and night. So, we have here, an image of all creation serving and worshipping God.

We read that the 24 elders bow down and worship, casting their crowns before God's throne. This is an act of submission. In ancient times, when a nation lost a war, the defeated king would be made to bow down and throw his crown to the feet of the conquering king, as an act of submission.

God is worshipped and praised as the One who created all things. For this reason, God is worthy of praise. The scene here is not one of fearful subjects bowing to a God who could strike them dead at any moment. It's a joyful scene of all creation praising God, a God who is not only holy and pure in judgement, but who also One who has great mercy for us. Let's pray.

Almighty God, you have created all things. You are worthy of our praise and worship. You are holy and just. As we think about your holiness, we realise how much we fall short of your perfect will. Give us eyes to see more clearly those areas where we fall short. We pray for those who are struggling

because of racism against those who are black, against indigenous people, against those who have low status in society. Help us to see where we have benefited from policies that give us an advantage over others, and work for equality, even if it means sacrificing some of our comfort. Thank-you, O God, that your purity, your holiness and justice are grounded in your mercy and love, as shown to us through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.