

# 10

## REVELATION 4

---

---

### OUR GOD IS AN AWESOME GOD – HE REIGNS FROM HEAVEN ABOVE

In the previous chapters we looked at the different introductory or cover-letters, written to each of the seven churches in Asia. With these ‘personalized’ letters, so to speak, they were all to receive the same main letter. That is the part that starts in Rev. 4.

As Christ confronts these churches with themselves, with the weaknesses, struggles, challenges, and dangers they were dealing with, he is holding up a mirror for his whole church, also for us today! The question is repeatedly: What do we learn about ourselves? What are the warnings we must take to heart?

We also heard about the great promises Christ has for “those who conquer the dangers and difficulties”. There are not only warnings, but there is also encouragement as we travel to the New Jerusalem.

And we need that because we are not there yet. That is why Christ adds in all these letters: *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches* (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). With these words “what the Spirit says to the churches”, he alerts us to what is coming in the rest of the book: Rev. 4 – 22.

In other words, Christ stresses seven times: “listen carefully to what follows, and learn how God is going to fulfil his promises. Let it warn, comfort, and encourage you.”

As Christians we suffer, along with everyone else, the consequences of sin in sickness, disease, war, and disasters. And as God’s children we are always again in need of forgiveness and renewal. On top of that, the faithful Christian church will often face persecution in this world.

Those are disappointing experiences in life. Yes, we confess that in all things God works for the good of those who love him (see Romans 8:28). But do we really believe this? Does it not often look as if the history and destiny of our world is controlled by evil powers?

Well, Revelation 4 and 5 help us to understand what is above and beyond our earthly reality. And what we come to see here will actually turn out to be the key to understanding the whole book of Revelation. Even in the midst of trials and temptations, in the midst of suffering and persecution, God is the Ruler who controls everything. It is all about him and about his greatness. We will first have a closer look at Rev. 4

## A HEAVENLY THRONE

---

Does heaven exist? Many folks may claim that they have some idea that there is an after-life. But in practice most people live in a closed world. Only what you see is reality. The rest is fantasy. We have this earth and we see what happens here, but that’s all we really know. You can dream up all kinds of stuff, but we do not have access to another world. There is no ‘above’. There is no “old man up in the attic”, as mocking blasphemers like to assure us. There is no heaven from where a God keeps an eye on us and from where he rules. We are stuck here, alone!

In this narrow-minded climate it is truly liberating to see *a door standing open in heaven*. Look: there is more than what we can see here! This is the first thing that John is seeing *after this*, he says. That means, after he has seen the exalted Christ (1:9–20) and perhaps after he has written the seven letters (Rev. 2 and 3).

It does not say how much time there was in between, but probably not much. He may even have completed those seven cover letters later on, when the main manuscript was almost ready to be sent out. Rev.1:10 suggests that John saw all his visions on the same day, the Lord's Day.

"An open door" indicates the opportunity to cross a boundary, to go to a place not normally accessible. This open door allows John to cross the threshold between earth and heaven. That is unique, and only if you have been invited will you have the privilege of seeing what is behind this door. Now John was invited, but via his eyes we also have the opportunity to cross the threshold and look at the realities beyond what we see here. That is exciting.

So, yes, John is invited. He hears the same voice he had heard in Rev. 1:10 and 12. The exalted Christ invites him to enter through this open door and find out what is behind it. *Come up here*, says Jesus, *and I will show you what must take place after this.*

This expression means the same as what we read in Rev. 1:1 and 1:19.

It sums up all that has happened already, all that is happening today, and all that is going to happen in the future. It covers the last days, the final phase of history before Jesus' return. It is about everything leading up to Jesus' second coming. It is about the whole of what we will find in Rev. 4 – 22.

Immediately John is, what he calls, *in the Spirit*. The Holy Spirit completely overpowers him and controls him, also physically. He is not hallucinating, but the Holy Spirit enables him to see and hear things that cannot be seen and heard by others.

He no longer sees with his physical eyes and hears with his physical ears. He has a vision. But that does not mean that what he sees and hears is not real. It is very real, including the location from where he will see this vision.

Well, what John is seeing is simply magnificent and spectacular. His report reflects this. It is full of awe and deep reverence. The first thing he sees is *a throne in heaven with one seated on the throne*. This is what catches his eye first. John does not say it here, but the same expression throughout the Bible makes clear, this is God's throne. And this throne is so important, that everything else is arranged around it.

God's throne appears forty-seven times in Revelation, and seventeen times in chapters 4 and 5. This makes God's throne the central reality of the whole book. But Revelation also tells us about rival thrones that compete with God's throne. In Rev. 2:13 we heard about "Satan's throne" and in Rev. 13:2 we will read about "the Dragon's throne". And Rev. 6:10 mentions "the throne of the beast". Thrones represent authority, ruling power. So, here is the question Revelation is going to answer: who rules? Who is in control? Who has the authority as the true king of the world?

From here, from below, from where we are in this dark, broken and suffering world, Satan and all his evil companions appear to be sovereign.

But when you look from above, from the perspective of the heavenly throne-room, it is clear that God rules. Here is the spiritual power-centre of the universe. The Biblical universe is not man-centered, or earth-centered. It is entirely theocentric, God-centered. Our God is an awesome God. He reigns from heaven above.

And only when you look at everything that happens in this world and in your life from the perspective of God's throne, only then you can begin to understand what is happening in this world and in your life.

John's vision is a bit like a visit to an airport control-tower. The casual observer at ground-level of a large International Airport sees planes, trucks, other vehicles, luggage-carts, etc. going everywhere. It looks pretty chaotic.

But when you are high up in the control-tower, it becomes evident that what is going on down below makes more sense. You see the overall plan and you hear the instructions.

To put it differently, through John's vision we are transported to the "control-tower" of the entire universe. In this way John, and with John we also, get the point-of-view from above that helps us interpret what happens here on earth. We will learn to recognize the big picture of what is happening in this world, and in our lives.

High above all the turmoil in this world God Almighty is "seated on his throne". That is an encouraging picture. God is not nervous. God is not frantically pacing around, shocked and upset, because of all the social unrest, political tension, wars, economic upheaval, injustice, and other terrible

things going on in this world. 'He is seated.' That is an image of rest and stability. It shows his sovereign majesty and power.

All things are governed by the Lord on the throne, and everything is under control. O, it's true, the plans of the one in control often escape our comprehension. We do not always get it. Sometimes we panic. But know and trust that he comprehends everything and that his plans will not fail.

John knows whom he is talking about when he says that '*one*' was seated on the throne in heaven. But he does not try to describe God. No one can describe God. That is just impossible. His glorious greatness will always exceed our grasp. We do not have adequate words to describe the holy and almighty God. We can only use symbols and symbolic terms to come as close to the reality as possible.

John pictures the overwhelming impression he has of the glorious radiance, the shining brilliance of the One seated on the throne as the bright and brilliant shine of precious stones, gems, jewels. The appearance is as the flashing, sparkling lustre of the crystal-clear jasper or diamond. And of the deep-red carnelian or ruby.

It is difficult to connect specific properties of these gems with specific attributes of God. Today's scholars do not always know what the ancient names of these minerals stand for. But that is ok. It is about the total picture of indescribable splendour, marvellous glory, and majesty. God himself is the ultimate source of all splendour and beauty.

However, God's heavenly throne is not only a place of tranquility. We hear in v.5 that *from the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder*. It reminds us of the Lord's appearance on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16-20). As I have said before, Revelation is not only a picture-book, it is also a noisy book! And here it begins. We get a frightening light-and-sound show, a manifestation of God's power and holiness as a warning that his judgments are coming.

God rules over a world in the devastating grip of sin. But he cannot tolerate sin. And he will not hesitate using the destructive powers he has at his disposal. God is high voltage! And that will be dangerous if you turn against him.

But he is not coming only to destroy the world. John also sees *around the throne a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald*. We remember the rainbow as the sign of God's covenant with the earth, with his creation. That is in Genesis 9, after the Flood. This rainbow around the throne in heaven tells us something similar. God remains faithful. In the midst of unfolding judgments, he guarantees his people life, hope, and comfort. There will not be total annihilation.

John sees two more things that highlight the awesome majesty of God's throne in heaven. Burning before the throne he sees seven torches of fire. This alludes to the lampstand with the seven lights that were burning day and night in the tabernacle and the temple.

When you think of it, this whole heavenly throne-room is like a huge sanctuary, reflected in the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, that is how the author of the letter to the Hebrews talks about it. In Heb. 9:24 he talks about a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one, of heaven itself.

Well, these seven blazing torches *are the seven spirits of God*, says John. You can also say, *the seven-fold Spirit of God*. Either way, here is God's Holy Spirit in all the fullness of his power. He is full of fire to destroy the wicked. Our God is a consuming fire, says the Bible, and so is his Spirit. Be careful. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is also full of fire for the sanctification, the renewal of God's people.

The other remarkable thing John is seeing before the throne is something that looked like *a sea of glass, like crystal*.

There are many different interpretations of this sea of glass. But perhaps it is best to stay with the resemblance of the earthly tabernacle or temple. Among the temple's furnishings there was what is called in 1 Kings 7:23 *a sea of cast metal*. This was basically a basin for ceremonial washing and cleansing. And so, when John sees what resembles a *crystal-clear sea of glass*, it symbolizes the washing and cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ.

Have a good look at the magnificent throne in heaven and see our awesome Triune God. He governs the world. He governs your life and my life. Perhaps you do not understand everything that is going on and why. Perhaps you are

confused or nervous or fearful. Or you struggle with lots of questions about poverty, hunger, violence, and destruction in this brutal world.

We do not get answers. But come, look through the open door and meet the holy and almighty God, sitting on his throne, the Ruler Supreme who controls everything. That is the best remedy when you are struggling with these things. It really is.

Therefore, in all that is going on, live as children of the Father, your sins washed away in the sea of Jesus' blood, renewed by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

## **H**EAVENLY ATTENDANTS

---

As astounding as it is already, there is more in heaven than just the throne of God. John's vision shows ever-widening concentric circles around the throne. The One seated on the throne is and remains in the very centre. It is all about him and his glory. The four living creatures form the innermost circle, which then expands to the next with twenty-four elders on twenty-four thrones. Then, in Rev. 5:11 the circle widens to include a multitude of angels. And finally, in 5:13 we see the outermost circle of all of God's creatures.

Here in Rev. 4 John sees the two innermost circles of the heavenly attendants to the throne of God. His attention goes first to the wider circle. *Around the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on these thrones were twenty-four elders.*

Here again you can find many different interpretations. Who are these elders? Some see them as 'angel-like' beings. But in Rev. 5:11 and 7:11 they are distinguished from angels. On top of that, in the Bible the word "elders" is never used for angels.

So we are probably talking about glorified humans, but then not just a random group of people. The word "elders" marks them as a group that represents the church. And then it makes sense to think of the entire church of the Old and New Testaments.

But why twenty-four? It could be an allusion to the twenty-four divisions of the Old Testament priests, as structured by David, although these elders on thrones do not seem to have any priestly function here.

Others have thought about the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles, since, according to Revelation 21, those names were written on the gates and foundations of the New Jerusalem. That seems pretty straightforward, but a written name is not the same as a live person. And in this case the apostle John would be watching himself sitting on one of these thrones. That would be kind of weird.

So, we should think more generally, most likely of wise, spiritual leaders. After all, throughout the Bible that's what 'elders' are. And as they sit on their thrones, they play an active role as rulers, who govern with God as his counsellors, his advisers.

Two significant details are also that *they were clothed in white garments* and had *golden crowns on their heads*. Their spotless garments show their spiritual purity, and their crowns show that they won the victory. In the letters to the churches in Sardis and Philadelphia we found these things as gifts of Christ, gifts of God's grace for his faithful followers. Here is another argument that in these twenty-four elders we have glorified humans, representing God's people.

In other words, the presence of these elders is a testimony of God's grace. As representatives of the church, they are who they are because of the wonderful gift of grace through the saving work of Jesus Christ. Is that not what the church is all about, the evidence of God's saving grace? And so here they are, as attendants to the heavenly throne to serve the glory of the One seated on the throne.

Then, in the centre, forming the inner circle around God's throne, are these mysterious and impressive *four living creatures*. Older translations say "animals" or "beasts", but they are not just animals. They are like animals it says in v. 7. They give an animal-like impression, but they are remarkable and very unusual creatures.

To begin with, they are covered with eyes all around, all over. This exceptional eyesight symbolizes how alert and watchful they are, all the time.

They can see in every direction. Nothing escapes their attention. It also allows them to see entirely unhindered the holiness, omnipotence, and awesome glory of the One on the throne.

But they are not identical. One looks like a lion, another one like an ox and a third one like an eagle. Now, a lion has the reputation of being the fiercest and most powerful of all the wild animals. An ox was known as the strongest of all the domesticated animals. A flying eagle is the most majestic of all the birds. John does not describe what the last one was like, other than that it *had the face of a man*. Together these fascinating creatures represent God's entire creation, including mankind.

All this equips them in an absolutely unique way to be heavenly attendants that reflect or represent something of the glory of God. After all, that was God's purpose when he made this world and all living creatures in it, that all the works of his hand would serve him and show some of his majesty.

There is also a close connection here with what we read in Ezekiel 1. There we also come across four majestic living creatures. They are not identical, though. Ezekiel saw four of the same, with each having four different faces, whereas John sees four different ones, each with one of these faces.

There is also a difference in the number of wings: the creatures in Ezekiel have four, but these creatures here in Revelation each have six. And this is exactly what the prophet Isaiah saw in his vision of the seraphim around God's throne in Isaiah 6:1–3: Each of them had six wings.

So, we recognize in these mysterious creatures the features of two very high-ranking orders of angels: the cherubim of Ezekiel 1 and the seraphim in Isaiah 6, powerful guardians of God's throne and holiness, ready to obey and serve the almighty God, anytime and anywhere. Our God is an awesome God, surrounded by heavenly attendants that represent his church and his creation.

## **H**EAVENLY WORSHIP

---

As mentioned, there is a great variety of interpretations when it comes to those 'elders' and 'living creatures' as heavenly attendants. But one thing

is clear: the purpose is worshipping him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever.

It is important to stress again that it is all about him; it is all about serving and celebrating God's sovereign glory and power as he directs and controls all things.

That is the heart and centre of the whole vision.

Heavenly worship is the main activity of the four living creatures. They are completely dedicated. *Day and night they never cease to say*, it says. They dwell in God's immediate presence. They marvel at his glory and wisdom. They recognize the history of our world as the unfolding and realization of his will. And all this triggers non-stop praise and worship that fills the heavenly sanctuary, where the acoustics are perfect.

*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come....*

This eternal quartet leads the heavenly worship of the Triune God, with a beautifully balanced song: three times 'holy' for the One on the throne with the three names Lord, God, and Almighty, of whom we hear three things: *who was, who is, and who is to come*. With this three-by-three structure – three times the divine number three – this song of glorious exultation of our Triune God reaches the highest and ultimate climax of heavenly beauty.

God is supremely holy, which is why here on earth his dwelling-place in the tabernacle and temple was called the "Holy-of-holies" or "Most holy place". And as the Lord God Almighty he alone is worthy of all praise and worship all the time. The powers and structures in our dominant culture do not control all things. They claim they do! And sometimes we think they do. But they do not. Praise our awesome God!

His sovereign Lordship is from eternity to eternity, and it overarches the past, the present and the future. He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And he leads his world from beginning to end. People can say "God doesn't exist" and "heaven is nothing but a fantasy". People can say whatever they want. But that does not stop creation's majestic praise and worship before the throne of the Almighty God.

It is the first singing that we hear in this book, with so much more to come.

And whenever they hear the song of glory, honour, and thanks of the living creatures, the twenty-four elders join in worship as an antiphonal choir. And so it goes, back and forth. The song of the church of all ages in response to, and simultaneously with, the song of all creation filling the holy throne-hall with marvellous and wonderful sounds.

God gathers his people so that they may forever praise and glorify him. Despite persecution, despite trials and temptations, despite internal strife, division, and lukewarm complacency – in the end the church of Jesus Christ will be victorious.

Praise God for the power of his grace in Jesus Christ.

That's why the twenty-four elders, who represent the church, *fall down before him who is seated on the throne* when they engage in worship. They worship the Holy God in deep humility and they are filled with great awe and reverence. They are who they are, only because of his amazing grace. That is also why *they cast their crowns before the throne*. Their victory is nothing but the victory of his grace.

And then their song blends in with the '*holy, holy, holy*' of the living creatures.... *Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory, and honour and power.*

And why is that? *You created all things, and by your will they existed, and were created.*

Recognize again a three-fold honour. "You are worthy, because of your active presence in this world as Maker and Ruler of all things. No one else could have done this. And you continue to govern and uphold all that your hands have made."

This is our God. His will alone is the real and ultimate reason for the existence of all things. And therefore, he alone is the ultimate refuge for each one of you, when you are stuck in distress, discouraged by your circumstances, or desperate in your misery.

He alone has absolute mastery, ownership, and control. His triumph is absolute. His power and wisdom are unfathomable. The universe belongs to

the One who sits on the throne. And through Jesus Christ he will bring his order to our chaos.

That is why the elders join the living creatures. The God of creation is the God of the church. And so, it becomes this marvellous, coordinated, and harmonious act of worship, glorifying the holy God as Creator and Ruler – simultaneous praise of creation and church: holy, holy, holy.....!

Through John we may witness this heavenly liturgy, this heavenly worship.

When we sing our psalms and hymns today we are not alone.

Oh, sometimes our voices are weak. Sometimes we sing with tears in our eyes.

But by God's grace in Jesus Christ our voices may join the voices in heaven.

Let therefore the power of the heavenly worship empower our worship here on earth.

For it is true – in Christ *our God is an awesome God.*

church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and who you should deal with these.

2. What does it mean to be *lukewarm*? And how can we help each other to avoid a lukewarm attitude toward God, toward the church and toward each other?
3. What is the wrong thinking behind the use of Revelation 3:20 to stimulate evangelism activities in the church?
4. In all these seven letters we hear close to the end or right at the end the words *he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. What is the intention of this phrase, which is apparently important enough to stress this to all the churches?

#### Chapter 10 – Revelation 4

1. At the end of all seven letters the glorified Christ promises various blessings to *the one who conquers*. What does he mean by that? And what or who are we to conquer? And how are we supposed to do this?
2. John's vision in Revelation 4 is pretty amazing. What does it mean for us and how should it impact us that God is supremely holy? How should the worship in heaven we read about, impact the manner in which we worship this holy God?
3. When the 24 elders represent the church in God's presence (verse 4), what does that tell us about the place and the role of the church in the last days (the time between Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> coming)? Does the fact that the church is represented by 'elders' teach us anything about the office of 'elder' in the church today?
4. Read Isaiah 6:1-3 and Ezekiel 1:4-28 and compare those descriptions with the description of the four living creatures in Revelation 4:6-8.

#### Chapter 11 – Revelation 5

1. How do we come to know God in Revelation 4 and 5? And what does 'worship' mean in the light of this chapter?
2. We read here about abundant worship: the 4 creatures, the 24 elders, myriads of angels, and joined by all God's earthly creatures. Is