

SUPREME HEADQUARTERS

by Ray C. Stedman

Chapter four of the book of Revelation represents a dramatic change. We move now to the third division of the book. In 1:19, we learned from the Lord himself the proper divisions of the book. There John the Apostle heard the Lord say to him, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later (or after this)." It is very important to observe these three divisions because they will guide us through this difficult and sometimes hard to understand book.

1. First, John was told to "write what you have seen." That covers the vision of chapter one. What John the Apostle saw was the Lord himself walking in the midst of his churches.
2. Then he was told to write "what is now." That occupies chapters two and three, i.e., the letters to the seven churches which is a sweeping prophecy of the present age of the church.
3. Then he was told "write what will take place after this."

It is to that division we come in chapter four, the beginning of what will take place after the church age.

After this [John writes] I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." {Rev 4:1 NIV}

Twice in that verse, at the beginning and the end, we are told that John will now be shown what will take place "after this" -- after the church has finished its course and has been caught away to be with the Lord.

John is first allowed to see into heaven. What he sees is a door opened which enables him to look into heaven. He is not the first one in Scripture to do this. The prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel were also privileged to look into heaven; to stand on earth and see into heaven and observe what was taking place there. But there is something more here, something extremely important. Not only does John see into heaven, but he is actually summoned into heaven. No other prophet in all of Scripture is called into heaven except John the Apostle.

Most commentators see that as very significant. He heard a voice "like a trumpet" saying to him, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." That indicates the viewpoint of John throughout the rest of the book of Revelation is to be from heaven. Many commentators feel that this is the place in Revelation where what is called the departure, or *rapture*, of the church takes place. It is most noteworthy that from here on in this book the church, which has occupied center-stage through the opening chapters, is never mentioned again until the final chapter. There are *saints* referred to throughout the book, but the word *church* does not appear again until the Bride of the Lamb is seen at the end.

What does that signify? Many feel (and I think they are right on this) that the church is represented by John the Apostle, and is at this point caught away into heaven. What John sees in the book from here on is what the church will see when it is caught away to be with Christ. That is a point of very interesting significance. It means that, as we read on in this book, we are no longer looking at things from the standpoint of time but of eternity. That is what makes the book both fascinating and difficult to interpret. In eternity, unlike in time, there is no prescribed sequence of events.

In time we are locked into patterns which logically follow one another. That pattern cannot be broken. You cannot go back into 1989. We are as far removed from 1989 as if we were 1,000 years away. You cannot go backward in time; you can only go forward and live only in the present. But in eternity that is no longer true. When we think of heaven we tend to project the time conditions of earth into heaven. We think of it as an immensely extended period of time, where we will be occupied in doing our favorite things as long as we like. But it is not like that.

Golfers talk about heaven as one great golf course where they can hit a ball 500 miles with one swing.

Fishermen think it is a great river filled with fish and every cast lands a huge fish.

When I was a cowboy in Montana, we talked about the "great roundup in the sky."

That is the way we often think of heaven but we must learn to think differently.

In heaven, things occur when they are spiritually ready for manifestation. I do not know how to put it any other way. In heaven, circumstances and situations may jump back and forth. That is what the book of Revelation does. The series of judgments that follow -- the seals of the seven-sealed book, the sounding trumpets, the pouring out of bowls or vials of the wrath of God -- do not follow one another in chronological succession. We must recognize that, when we try to interpret this book. It will all come more clear to us, I hope, as we get into the book itself, but it is a very important point.

Heaven is not on some distant planet. Heaven is another dimension of existence right here and now. It is a realm of being just slightly beyond our senses today. When John saw a door opened into heaven he was permitted to see into a dimension that is present all the time and which governs the visible affairs of earth. That is the biblical position from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation, and especially in Genesis and Revelation. We must learn to think of it that way.

What we are given in this book are certain reference points, certain events to which the book returns again and again. I am going to show you one of these in just a moment. But let us stay now with the text and look at what John saw when he was actually taken into that fifth dimension of existence, called heaven.

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. {Rev 4:2-3 NIV}

What did he see? The first thing he saw, central to everything else, was a great throne and someone sitting on it. He found himself suddenly in Supreme Headquarters!

Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor I took ship to Hawaii, not as a serviceman but as a civilian. I went out there while the battleships were still lying wrecked in Pearl Harbor and joined the paint crew of an organization responsible for building facilities all over the islands for the Navy. Most of this crew was made up of Japanese who lived in Hawaii, but because we were at war with Japan there were certain areas where they, as painters, were not allowed to work. There were two of us from the mainland, and we were sent into these areas. One day, together with my partner, I was assigned to paint Admiral Nimitz's office, the Commander-in-Chief's headquarters of the Pacific. I remember with what awe I entered that office. I found myself surrounded with charts of the Pacific islands. It was impressive to me to realize that here the Admiral with his captains actually were planning the events of the war; that all the far-flung assaults of the United States Navy during the war were conceived and brought into existence in this very spot. I was impressed and awed to be permitted into that secluded area. But that pales in comparison with what John must have felt when he found himself in the control center of the universe!

The first thing he saw was a throne. That throne is a central theme of the book of Revelation. There are only five chapters where the word "throne" is not found. It is very important and impressive to remember that despite all that takes place on earth, all the events we read of in the newspapers and see on television, as exciting or saddening as these things are, they all somehow relate to that central throne from which God rules in his universe. We must never forget that behind all human events is the government of God.

Some years ago I was in England and was scheduled to speak to pastors' groups in various churches in the London area. One evening I found myself in a Methodist chapel out on the road from London to Cambridge. Most of the meetings that I had been speaking at were very poorly attended, (as were most of the church services in England at that time -- they still are) but this chapel for some reason was jammed with people that night. It was not because they came to hear me, because no one knew who I was. But people were actually

standing outside the doors on the street. We had a tremendous song service. These people were really singing their hearts out with songs such as we have sung this morning. "Majesty" was one of the choruses they sang. Another was "Our God Reigns." I rejoiced with them as they were belting out the chorus of "Our God Reigns." But, in the midst of it I began to smile to myself, for my eye had fallen on the chorus sheet that had been handed out to us and I noticed that the typist had made a mistake in the title of the song. We were singing "Our God Reigns," but what the sheet said was "Our God Resigns!" I was grateful that they were not singing it as it was written, but unfortunately that is the way many people seem to sing today: They sound as if our God had resigned. But he has not. Our God reigns! That is the theme of Revelation.

That marks a very important fact which runs directly contrary to the thought and spirit of the age in which we live. The fact that there is a throne, means there are absolutes which cannot be altered or changed. They are guaranteed by the authority of the throne! Nothing man does, or can do, alters them in the least degree. There are scientific absolutes. Scientists have to work around these. They must discover the "laws" of what they are doing. There are also moral absolutes which cannot be altered, no matter how far society may drift from their standards. God maintains them and enforces them. He is not frightened by man's aberrations. He is not biting his fingernails lest people cancel out the standards of the past. He maintains them constantly by the authority of his throne. Jeremiah saw this. There is a wonderful passage in his prophecy where, amidst the tumult of his days, he declares, "A glorious throne, set on high from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary," {cf, Jer 17:12}. That is the throne that John saw.

He saw, too, that the throne was occupied. Someone was sitting on it. Immediately our expectations are heightened by that. At last we are going to find out what God looks like! Have you ever wondered what God looks like? Here John is permitted to see God on his throne. What is he like?

What he sees are simply colors -- colored lights, flashing like jewels -- burning, flashing, pure colors. There are scholars who feel that the letters of John were written after the book of Revelation. If that is true it may explain why in his first letter he says, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all," {1 Jn 1:5b KJV}. Perhaps he is remembering the cascading colors that reflected the majesty and glory of God. Moses was told, "No man can see the face of God and live," {cf, Exod 33:20}. No one has ever seen God at any time; all that man may see are manifestations of his Being which tell out his attributes and glory. John saw a figure seated upon the throne but he could not see his features through the dazzling lights that danced about the throne.

Ezekiel saw the same thing. The first chapter of his prophecy records a vision very similar to this one. But no one could ever describe God's features for God is more than a man. He manifests himself in these wonderfully significant colors, and the colors are full of meaning. They indicate that it is not just the Father whom John sees on the throne. It is noteworthy that there are three of them mentioned here:

The first one is a "jasper," which is really a diamond, the most beautiful of all gems because it has the ability to capture the light and flash it in brilliant displays of color. That is why "diamonds are a girl's best friend!" -- for they so beautifully reflect light. Brilliant crystal reflects the dominant attribute of God the Father, his holiness, his perfection. Diamonds are graded as to whether they are perfect or not; here is a perfect diamond reflecting the perfection of the Father, the incredible balance of attributes in his being so that he is always exactly what anyone can imagine perfection to be. The diamond speaks of the Father -- the holiness of the Father.

The second stone is the carnelian, or sardius, which was blood red in color -- a glowing, beautiful, blood-red stone. That, of course, immediately suggests the Son. His major characteristic is his willingness to shed his blood on our behalf, to give himself in redemptive atonement for our sins. It is the wonder of the ages. He is the Lamb of God, slain from before the foundation of the world.

The third color was the emerald. John saw a great rainbow circling the throne, green as an emerald. Green is the color of nature, of creation. A rainbow was first seen at the flood of Noah. After the terrible holocaust that wiped out the world of that day by a flood, Noah for the first time saw in the sky a rainbow, not a green rainbow, but a rainbow of various colors, just as we see them today during a mist or rain. The rainbow was the promise of grace expressed in nature. "Never again," God said, "will I ever visit the earth with a universal flood," {cf, Gen 9:9-26}. Never again. That is God's grace shown in the natural world.

This rainbow with various shades of green circling the throne speaks of the Holy Spirit administering the holiness and the redemption of God to all creation. I do not know if you are aware of this, but all rainbows are a circle. We usually see only part of it. Where the rainbow touches the ground we see an arc, but if we saw the whole thing it would be a circle. About the only time you can see a rainbow as a circle is when you are flying in a plane. Many of you perhaps have had the experience of looking down on clouds where showers have taken place, and you see a rainbow, a perfect circle. At the heart of the circle, invariably, is the shadow of the plane you are flying in! I have seen it many times. It is a heartening thing when you are flying through a storm to look out and see a rainbow which has right at its center the plane you are flying in! It is a promise of grace in the midst of storm.

Next John sees are the companions of God, the court of heaven,

Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders [or ancients]. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. {Rev 4:4 NIV}

There has been much debate as to who these twenty-four elders represent. Many commentators take them to be redeemed saints, both of the Old and New Testaments; twelve elders of Israel and twelve apostles. I have to tell you that for many years I held that view myself. I have changed my view because, for one thing, I have always been troubled by the fact that if these are the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles, then John was one of them for he was one of the twelve apostles. Is he seeing himself seated there? It does not make sense, does it? They were viewed as saints because they wore white robes and they have victors' crowns upon their heads. This has suggested to many that they have conquered evil and so wear crowns, and their robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. But there are other reasons for crowns and robes as we shall see in a moment.

I have now come to see that this group is probably what Daniel and other Old Testament prophets saw when they looked into heaven. In the fourth chapter of Daniel the prophet is called before King Nebuchadnezzar to interpret a dream of the King; a dream of a great tree which is cut down and only the stump remains. Daniel's interpretation was that the tree was Nebuchadnezzar himself and it meant his crown would be taken away from him for a period of seven years, he would lose his mind and be turned out to eat grass like a horse or a cow for the seven years. Then his throne and his authority would be restored to him. When Daniel tells the king this he puts it in this way.

This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones; {Dan 4:17a KJV}

There are others associated with God's judgment upon this king who are called "watchers" and "holy ones." The verse continues:

... to the intent that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever he will, and sets up over it the basest of men, {Dan 4:17b KJV}

That may also explain why we have had certain politicians in office! In the seventh chapter of Daniel the prophet makes a somewhat similar reference. There Daniel, too, saw into heaven, and this is what he saw,

I beheld till thrones [plural] were placed, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands ministered with him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the judgment was set [or, as the NIV puts it, 'The court was seated'] and the books were opened. {Dan 7:9-10 KJV}

So Daniel also saw thrones surrounding the throne of God upon which individuals were seated who entered into the judgments and decisions of God.

In the 26th verse of that same 7th chapter, Daniel says:

But the judgment shall sit: [or 'the court will sit'; and, with reference to the anti-Christ] they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it unto the end. {Dan 7:26 KJV}

Once again, there is a reference to this council in Psa. 89:6-7,

**For who in the skies above can compare with the Lord?
Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings?
In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared;
he is more awesome than all who surround him. {Psa 89:6-7 NIV}**

So who are the twenty-four elders? I believe that they are angels who are put in charge of the present age. They are a body of twenty-four intelligent, powerful angels associated with the government of God, especially with regard to fallen angels and redeemed people. They are wearing crowns because they are victors in their battles with Satan; and they are wearing white robes because these are righteous angels who have refused to join the rebellion of the devil.

But now John sees still other symbols.

From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. {Rev 4:5-6a NIV}

Let us remember these are symbols. What they represent does not always appear like this. These are pictures, a manifestation of what actually is there. The symbols here are very instructive.

First, John says, "from the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder." These are the sights and sounds associated with the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. The mountain was shaking constantly with great rumblings and thunders, it was covered by dark clouds lit by lightning flashes. It was so awesome a sight that the people of Israel were stunned with fear. These sounds are a symbol, therefore, of the judgments of God.

Revelation is basically the time when God at last turns from grace to judgment. All through the Bible he has been a gracious God, appealing to people to open their minds, seeking to instruct them anew, to make them stop and listen and adjust to the truth. But at last he must turn to judgment. That is what this book is all about: It tells us how God at last visits judgment upon all people.

I recently heard our good friend, Chuck Swindoll, say that the first theological statement that he could ever remember was spoken to him by his mother when he was just a little boy. Ten words that he would never forget. She said to him on one occasion, "May God help you if you ever do that again!" In a sense that is what the book of Revelation is about. It is God carrying out his last warning to men, because in their consummate folly they have done evil again and again.

The symbols here of lightnings, rumblings and peals of thunder, are repeated several times through the book of Revelation. They represent a reference point to which the book returns again and again. When you find them you will realize that you have come again to the final scenes of God's judgment of man's evil. I have not time to read them all to you but, here are a couple of them which you can look up yourself: In 8:5, and again in 11:19, and there are still other appearances further on in the book. Each time they appear an additional element of judgment is added.

The other symbols here are symbols of the Spirit of God, the instrument of God's judgment. John saw seven burning lamps blazing with divine vengeance. That is the Spirit of God. And he saw a great sea of crystal before the throne. As we have already seen, crystal speaks of the purity, the holiness of God. The sea is the Spirit of God in his purity and unsullied holiness. That is why we call him the Holy Spirit. It is that holiness which he must impart to anyone who dares to stand in the presence of God. "Without holiness," we are told in

Hebrews, "it is impossible to please God." This is the Spirit of holiness upon whom God's throne rests.

The final characters that John sees are described in Verse 6-8:

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

**"Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come." {Rev 4:6b-8 NIV}**

These are weird creatures. They are like winged animals, covered with eyes all over their bodies, even under their wings we are told. Many ask, "Who are they?" If you read the first chapter of Ezekiel, as I have already suggested, you will see that Ezekiel saw similar creatures which he describes in similar ways. He calls them "cherubim." Cherubim are not little fat, naked babies with miniwings that fly around and shoot people with love arrows. No, they are like these creatures here. Isaiah describes them in his 6th chapter and he calls them "Seraphim" ("burning ones"). They appear in different configurations. Sometimes they have six wings, sometimes only four.

Ezekiel mentions also the faces here -- the lion, the ox, the man, and the eagle. John sees the same thing. There are four man, and the eagle. Four is always the number of government. These creatures therefore are somehow associated with God's government of the created universe. We are very ignorant people when it comes to natural phenomena, but here are creatures who understand and help God rule the natural world. Eyes symbolize discernment and knowledge. Wings describe rapidity, swiftness of movement. Faces depict the major qualities of life in the created universe. A lion speaks of power; an ox of patience; a man of intelligence; and an eagle of swiftness. These living creatures are the ones who summon the four horsemen in Chapter 6. They say to these riders, "Come!" and call them into activity. They work at leading creation to worship its Creator.

Nature worships when anything in it fulfills the intention God had for it. The poet has written,

"Full many a rose was born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

Waste? No rose ever wastes its sweetness. God smells it if man does not. And one of the tasks of these four living creatures is to elicit from the whole creation the perfection God intended for it. That is why they are praising God all the time -- for new vistas of creative wisdom and power break upon them constantly.

Here in front of the podium are some magnificent lilies. If you took one and carefully examined it you could not help but be impressed with the marvel of its design -- its intricacy, balance, complexity and beauty, all put together by the power and wisdom of God. All nature should lead us to worship God in the same way.

The chapter closes with the worship of all heaven for the creative wisdom and power of God.

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

**"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being." {Rev 4:9-11 NIV}**

The nearest thing we have on earth to this is a great Messiah Sing. I do not know if you have ever joined one,

but, at Christmastime, if you get an opportunity, go to one of these great auditoriums packed with perhaps 3000 people, with a full orchestra and a great choir singing out the Scriptural phrases from the Messiah. It is moving, powerful: "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." That is what heaven is engaged in declaring.

It is not a mere mechanical recital. We must not ever read it that way. Heaven is not boring. Most people's idea of heaven reminds me of that soup commercial where people are drinking soup and saying, "Boring! Boring!" That is what many think heaven to be, but heaven is not like that. These people cry out in praise because they are continually discovering new, exciting, awesome aspects of God's wisdom and power breaking afresh upon them. So they are constantly driven to praise God for who he is. That is what true worship ought to be.

Eugene Peterson, a powerful communicator in our day, has said that true worship does five things to you:

1. It centers things for you: You see God as the center of everything. Your ego is no longer center. You stop living for yourself but for him.
2. And it gathers: It includes others with you. You become part of a family, a congregation. It crosses lines of exclusion.
3. And it reveals: things you never saw before you now begin to understand. The familiar patterns of life take on new vistas.
4. And it makes you sing: Christians are always singing. There are many songs in this book of Revelation, despite the judgments, because Christians can sing when other people weep.
5. And finally, it affirms: It responds to God's great promises with an "Amen" and a "Yes" from you.

I want to close with a paragraph from Eugene Peterson which beautifully gathers up the power of worship:

Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by spectres and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose.

Wise words. Let us join with the hymn writer in one of the great songs of worship:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.
How blessed, how glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, Victorious, Thy great name we praise.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
All praise we would render, O help us to see
Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee!

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