

# LECTURES ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE FIRST VISION OF HEAVEN

(Lecture 4)

As we turn from chapter 3 to chapter 4, how different the scenes! We are no longer occupied with the professing church in the place of testimony, nor with events on the earth at all; but a door is opened in heaven, and, escorted by the beloved apostle John, if I may so speak, we are carried far above the shifting scenes of this poor world, and permitted to gaze with awe-struck eyes upon a scene of glory indescribable, and to hear things kept secret from the foundation of the world.

The opening verse begins the third great division of this book - "**I will shew thee things which must be hereafter**"; the stirring panorama of wonders, both heavenly and earthly, which must take place after the church's history is ended.

From the close of chapter 3, we never see the church on earth again through all the rest of this solemn book. We read of "**saints**," but they are distinct altogether from the church of the present dispensation. Israel comes into view and a great multitude of spared Gentiles, saved out of the great tribulation; but no church, no body of Christ, no bride of the Lamb any more upon the earth!

The fact is patent enough for every careful reader to notice it. What is the explanation of it? Simply this, I believe: we must understand the rapture, of I Thessalonians 4:16, 17, as transpiring between chapter 3 and chapter 4. Of this the rapture of the apostle is the symbol. He sees the door opened in heaven. His attention is turned from earth to glory. He is, in spirit, caught up, and far above all the mists of this lower scene he beholds a "**throne set in heaven**," and a Throne-sitter upon it. The likeness of this august Being he cannot even attempt to portray. He only tells us he beheld a Presence whose glory was like a jasper and a sardius.

The jasper of the Revelation is not the opaque stone we know by that name. It is later described as clear as crystal (chap. 21:11). It is probably the diamond, the most brilliant of all the precious jewels. The other stone is blood-red, and may really be the ruby. Thus the two together give the idea of glory and of sacrifice.

Remembering that many of the first readers of the Revelation were converted Jews, we might ask, What would these stones suggest to them? Surely every instructed Hebrew would instantly recall that they were the first and last stones in the breastplate of the high priest (Exodus 28:17-20). As these stones bore the names of the tribes of Israel, arranged according to the births of the twelve patriarchs, the one would suggest at once the name Reuben, "**Behold a Son,**" and the other Benjamin, "**Son of my right hand.**"

It is Christ enthroned; the Son about to reign in power who is before the Seer's vision. Round about the throne a rainbow, like an emerald, the stone of Judah ("**Praise**") is seen, suggesting the perpetuity of the Noahic covenant, and God's unchanging goodness, despite all man's failure, folly and wickedness.

But now the fourth verse brings before us a sight never beheld in heaven on any previous occasion: twenty-four thrones (not merely "**seats**") surrounding the central throne, and upon them twenty-four elders seated with victors' crowns (not diadems) upon their heads, and clothed in priestly robes of purest white. Who are these favored ones gathered around the glorious central Being? I do not think we need be in any doubt as to their identity, if we compare Scripture with Scripture and distrust our own imagination, which can but lead us astray.

In I Chronicles, chapter 24, we read of something very similar; and again I would remind you that many of John's first readers were Hebrews, thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament. Can we question for a moment that every Jewish believer would instantly remember the twenty-four elders appointed by King David to represent the entire Levitical priesthood? He divided the priests into twenty-four courses, each course to serve for two weeks at a time in the temple which Solomon was to build. The same arrangement was in force when our Lord's forerunner was announced. Zacharias was "**of the course of Abiah,**" the eighth in order (Luke 1:5).

The priests were many thousands in number; they could not all come together at one time, but when the twenty-four elders met in the temple precincts in Jerusalem, the whole priestly house was represented. And this is the explanation, I submit, of the symbol here. The elders in heaven represent the whole heavenly priesthood - that is, all the redeemed who have died in the past, or who shall be living at the Lord's return. In vision they were seen - not as a multitudinous host of millions of saved worshipers, but just twenty-four elders, symbolizing the entire company. The church of the present age and Old Testament saints are alike included. All are priests. All worship. There were twelve patriarchs in Israel, and twelve apostles introducing the new dispensation. The two together would give the complete four and twenty.

Then, observe further: these persons are not angels. They are redeemed men who have overcome in the conflict with Satan and the world, for they wear victors' wreaths upon their brows. Angels are never said to be "**crowned,**" nor have they known redemption.

There are two kinds of crowns mentioned in this book:

- The victor's crown, and
- The ruler's diadem.

The former is the word here used. It refers to the wreath, of laurel or of pine, bound about the brow of the victor in the Greek games; it is the same word so often used in the New Testament when reward for service is the theme.

And now, note carefully: no saints will ever be crowned until the apostle Paul receives that crown of righteousness which the Lord revealed to him as his reward. In II Timothy 4:8, he says: **"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love (or, have loved) His appearing."**

The expression **"at that day"** refers to the day of Christ, when He shall come for His own, and they will all be manifested before His judgment-seat. He says: **"Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with Me, to give every man according as his work shall be"** (Revelation 22:12). Surely it follows then that no rewards are given out till He returns for His saints. Therefore there can be no crowned elders in heaven till after the rapture.

This, I believe, is a point of greatest importance to-day; for many are being troubled by the thought that perhaps the great tribulation, of which so large a part of this book treats, has already begun. But all such fears are set at rest when the facts I have been emphasizing are kept in mind. But as I want to dwell a little on this in the next lecture, I forbear further comment now. Only I trust it is clear to all that the elders are the heavenly saints, surrounding the Lord in glory, God the Son sitting on the central throne.

There are circumstances connected with that throne which make it clear that a dreadful storm is about to burst on that world below, from which they are viewed as having so lately come. Lightnings, thunderings, and voices tell of this; and as we go on in the study of the book, we shall see more added from time to time as conditions become increasingly solemn.

Following out the symbolism of the tabernacle, seven lamps of fire are seen burning before the throne, as the seven-branched lampstand burned just outside the veil, before God's throne on earth - the ark of old. These lamps are said to be **"the seven Spirits of God,"** a figure which we have already seen (in chapter 1:4) sets forth, not seven distinct Spirits, but the one Holy Spirit in the seven-fold plenitude of His power.

The sea of glass of verse five calls to mind the sea of brass in Solomon's temple.

That sea symbolized, like the laver, the Word of God, for it contained the water used for priestly cleansing, and we are sanctified and cleansed by **"the washing of water by the Word."** But this sea is not for cleansing, so it is as crystal, and later, we find the martyred tribulation-saints standing on it.

It is the Word of God still, but no longer needed for cleansing, because desert experiences are viewed here as forever passed. But the Word abides, stable and sure forevermore - a glassy sea filled with crystal - firm and glorious, on which the people of God can stand eternally.

The four “**beasts**”, or “*living ones*” are in the midst of the throne, where only Deity can dwell, and they are linked with it round about. They represent the attributes of the living God.

- The lion is the well-known symbol of divine majesty.
- The young ox, the divine strength graciously serving man.
- The face of a man indicates intelligence and purpose; it tells us that Deity is no mere blind force, nor the “Great First Cause” or impersonal Law simply.
- The eagle suggests swiftness in detecting evil and executing judgment.

Six-winged and full of eyes they speak of incessant activity and omniscience. “**The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.**” They cry, “**Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come,**” for all God’s attributes glorify the Eternal Son.

The elders bow in worship at this announcement, and cast their crowns at the feet of Him that sits upon the throne, adoring Him as Creator, saying, “**Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor, and power; for Thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.**”

A higher note is struck in chapter five, but the blessed truth is here proclaimed, that He who died on the cross is worshiped by all the redeemed in heaven. There can be no mistake as to the Person. If John chap. I, Colossians I and Hebrews I are all carefully compared with this closing verse, it makes it perfectly clear that it is Christ Jesus, the Son, who created all things. Without Him was nothing made. All things are by Him and for Him. So He it is who fills the throne and is the center of the worship here described.

In a day such as ours, when His glory as the Eternal Son is so often denied, when His true Deity, His virgin-birth, His sinless humanity are all alike flouted by apostate teachers as so much traditional lore to be rejected at will, how refreshing to the soul to turn from earth to heaven and contemplate the glory displayed there as His and the unhindered adoration of His own as they prostrate themselves before His throne. If He be not God, then heaven will be filled with idolaters, for it is written: “**Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.**”

But we need not for a moment enter such an “if.”

He is “**God over all, blessed forever,**” and He is also Man. God the Son in grace was born of the virgin, and He it is who fills the throne above. Nor will He ever abdicate that throne, even though He shall soon descend to gather His own to Himself, and to reign over all the earth as Son of Man, sitting on the throne of His father David. Both thrones are His, for all glory belongs to Him by the Father’s firm decree. Thus shall all men eventually honor the Son even as they honor the Father.

I add a further word as to the living creatures.

- In chapter 4 we see them linked peculiarly with the throne.
- In chapter 5 they are most particularly linked with the elders.

We have suggested that they represent the divine attributes. During the present age and ere the Lamb takes the book of judgment these are largely seen in angelic ministry. But “**Unto the angels hath He not put in subjection the world [age] to come.**”

In that day God will work through His redeemed ones, hence the living ones join in the New Song, voicing the joy of the saints in whom the divine glory will be displayed. The living creatures of Ezekiel’s vision and the cherubim on the mercy-seat tell the same story.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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