

REVELATION

Part 10: “Before the Throne”

Revelation 4:1–11

By David A. Ritchie

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Summary

Revelation 4:1–11 invites us to witness the awe-inspiring vision of the heavenly throne room. In this sermon, through vivid imagery and insightful commentary, Pastor David A. Ritchie explores the majesty of God's throne, contrasts it with earthly counterfeits of power, and encourages believers to draw near with boldness before the throne of grace.

Scripture Reading

“After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ‘Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created’” (Revelation 4:1–11, ESV).

Introduction

Have you ever considered how objectively odd Christian worship is?

We wake up early on the weekend morning while many of our neighbors are either sleeping in or preparing for brunch. We put on our Sunday best, and some of us even wrangle our kids so that we can travel to a building where people from all ages and walks of life gather in a room called a sanctuary where we are called to worship.

During worship, we sing along in unison as a mostly volunteer band of musicians play songs while the lyrics to these songs are displayed on screens. Now, we may have become so accustomed to this ritual that we forget that it essentially amounts to a corporate version of karaoke. We then listen to a person give an impassioned lecture on an ancient piece of literature, originally written in a different language, that is literally centuries and millennia old. Sometimes, the speaker (who shall remain nameless) might get a little too in the weeds about some obscure period of history or get excited about explaining some old painting. We then speak out loud to a deity that we cannot see and receive a tiny corporate snack of a wafer and grape juice (which, let's be honest, is not the most appetizing of refreshments). Then, we are sent back into our normal lives to live in light of this worship experience.

To outsiders, such an experience might understandably seem odd and strange. But for ages, Christians have believed that somehow, through these very rhythms of worship, we can actually experience the supernatural and the divine.

Sometimes, these moments are uniquely spiritually charged, like last week when we witnessed multiple baptisms and celebrated the triumph of resurrection. In such moments it is like we can see the faintest glimpse of heaven.

But even when our times of worship feel more mundane and normal, Christians believe that through these normal means of grace—through sermons and songs and sacraments—the Spirit of the living God speaks to us, nourishes us, and even transforms us. For whenever we gather together as the people of God, the Lord who rules over creation and time is somehow mysteriously in our very midst.

But what if we could actually fully see the God of all creation in our midst with the unveiled eyes; with eyes of the apocalypse?

In today's passage from Revelation, the Apostle John beholds yet another extraordinary vision [show [Johannes in San Giovanni Laterano](#)]. He looks up into the heavens, and he hears a voice like a trumpet. He witnesses an open door in heaven, and he hears a voice command him, "*Come up here, and I will show you what takes place after this!*"

At once, John is, as the text says, "*in the spirit*" (ἐν πνεύματι) and within the unseen realm of heaven. Immediately, the apostle is overwhelmed by the radiance of heavenly light and the weight of heavenly glory. He sees flashes of lightning and hears peals of thunder. And, in the midst of all of this, there is One sitting on a throne.

For John is now in the very throne room of heaven, before the throne of God.

Exposition

1.) The Glory of the Throne of God

I've had the opportunity to visit and stand within one of the great throne rooms of the world [show [2Spanish Throne](#)]. It's the throne room of Spain inside the Palacio Real in Madrid.

The room was designed under the reign of King Carlos III. It is filled with opulent fabrics and the rich golden and crimson hues that compose the royal coat of arms. The walls are adorned by golden furniture and bronze sculptures of mythological beings. Hanging jewel-encrusted chandeliers illuminate the space, and immense mirrors made of pure silver make the room look expansive. The thrones of the King and Queen of Spain are guarded by six golden lions, and they sit atop a staired platform that only royalty can ascend.

Every inch of this room is meant to portray power and wealth. And from this room, the Spanish monarchy ruled a once vast empire.

But the truth is many Spanish monarchs have come and gone. The once-mighty empire has dwindled. And the throne room itself is more of a tourist site than it is a true seat of government.

But the throne room that John sees is unlike any throne on this earth. The kingdom represented by this throne will never end, and the one who sits on this throne is eternally glorious and powerful. John wants us to see that even the most impressive thrones on earth are but shadows and parodies of the throne of God, who reigns in heaven.

Let's look at our text again. John says of his vision in the spirit, *"...behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight"* (Rev 4:2-7).

John beholds a sight of overwhelming glory and splendor as he sees the One seated on the throne [show [3The Four and Twenty Elders by John Henry Stock](#)]. The Enthroned One shines with the splendor of precious stones, and a vast sea of crystal glass stretches before him.

This is not only the rightful ruler of the world—he is the author of the cosmos, the maker of heaven and earth, the creator of all things visible and invisible! With unveiled eyes, John sees the One who is sovereign over all seated on his throne.

Before the throne are seven torches or lamps of fire. Remember, seven is a repeated number throughout all of Revelation that represents completion and perfection. Thus, the Spirit of the Lord is represented as both multifaceted in glory and complete in perfection.

Around this throne are twenty-four smaller thrones and twenty-four elders who sit on those thrones. They each wear a robe of white, representing purity and holiness. And they each wear a golden crown that represents royalty.

As a group, these twenty-four are represented as members of a royal court or the council of the king. In the ancient and medieval world, royal courts comprised nobles and aristocrats. But who composes the heavenly court of the Lord?

The majority view of both the church fathers and modern New Testament scholars is that these twenty-four are essentially two separate groups of twelve. The first group of twelve represents the twelve patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel, the ancient people of God. The second group of twelve represents the twelve apostles of Jesus, who are the foundation of the church and the people of God from all nations. Together, these twenty-four elders function as representatives of all the people of God throughout all of time.

In this vision, it is almost hard to fathom that the twelve patriarchs of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus were once bronze-age shepherds and Galilean fishermen. Their presence in the royal court of heaven is an enduring sign that God has always chosen the unlikely and the unworthy to be his instruments of grace. And here they are, seated with the Lord in the heavenly places.

And notice that their position of honor does not lead them to pride—it leads them to humble gratitude and worship. The crowns they have been given will all be cast down before the feet of the One who reigns on the throne of heaven.

So, too, when we come together in worship, we have an opportunity to set aside all of our own glory, all our pretensions, and all of our own claims to power and instead acknowledge the One who is truly worthy of our allegiance and attention.

Also, before the throne of God, John witnesses what the text calls “four living creatures.” This isn’t the first time such creatures appear in Scripture. In fact, centuries before, the prophet Ezekiel saw the same beings when he had a vision of the throne of God while exiled in Babylon (see: Ezek 1:5–11).

The creatures are surreal and mysterious, composed of eyes and wings and various representations of creatures within God’s creation [show [4The Tetramorph at Cluny](#)]. According to scholars, the lion represents nobility, the ox represents strength, the face of

the man represents wisdom, and the eagle represents swiftness. The number four represents the fullness of the four geographical directions.

Together, these creatures form a composite image of the best of creation. As the elders represent the people of God, these four living creatures are angelic representations of all creation centered around the glory of God.

They are all creatures of our God and king lifting up their voice and sing in unceasing worship. As John describes, *“And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ‘Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created’”* (Rev 4:8–11).

All in the throne room are moved by the immensity of God’s glory to worship him. The creatures sing and declare that God is *“Holy, holy, holy.”*¹ The word holy means that God is perfect, pure, and set apart. That this word is repeated three times means that God is the utmost of holiness.

So too, corporate worship is designed to be a weekly reminder that God is unlike anything else in this world. He alone is ultimate. He alone is worthy of our praise.

One of the most famous stories in the Old Testament is of the moment Moses encounters the Lord in the burning bush on Mount Sinai [show [5The Burning Bush by Sébastien Bourdon \(1616-1671\)](#)]. At the burning bush, God speaks to Moses and calls Moses to deliver the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt and lead them to the freedom of the Promised Land.

Moses is overwhelmed by the sight and the experience. He knows he stands on holy ground. He responds and asks this mysterious God of the mountain what his name is. But God does not give Moses a proper name. He simply says, *“I am who I am”* (Exod 3:14),

This is a God who cannot be compared to or contained by anything in creation. He cannot be defined or confined within the limits of human language.

All of creation depends on him, yet he is dependent on nothing. We live and move and have our being only because of his power. The very air we breathe is contingent upon his mercy. Yet the God who sits on the throne is contingent upon nothing.

¹ Note that the Prophet Isaiah also heard the angels sing this same song in his vision of God on his throne (see: Isa 6:3).

This is the God who is on the throne that John sees. This is the One in whose presence John stands. And this is the One who is still in our very midst when we gather in worship.

2.) The Counterfeits of the Throne of God

The words of Revelation 4 were written and revealed to show the people of God of all ages where true power lies. For the people of God living in the first century, the power they saw and experienced every day was the brutal and demeaning power of the empire. In this setting, the people of God were tempted to have their hearts and minds formed by counterfeits of the throne of God.

At the time when John and the first Christians lived, the empire of Rome ruled and reigned over the ancient world through conquest and violence and brutal governmental control.

Now, it must be said that human government is a necessary thing for a fallen and sin-fractured world. As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 13, earthly rulers and states were instituted by God for the purpose of restraining evil, promoting justice, cultivating the common good, and sustaining peace within a world that was fractured by the power of sin.

But the Bible is an honest book that shows us how the kingdoms of this world go awry. So easily we elevate the kings and kingdoms of this world to a place of ultimate glory in our heart. And, like the builders of the ancient tower of Babel, sometimes those same kings and kingdoms elevate themselves in such a way that desire more than compliance—they desire *worship*.

And when any good thing becomes an ultimate thing, when a good thing is exalted to the place where only God should be, it becomes an idol that crushes and enslaves.

The Romans were so bold that they even literally exalted their former emperors to a place of divinity. This process was called “*apotheosis*.” Apotheosis meant that a man could be exalted to a place of being a god.

The first time this happened was when the Roman senate declared Julius Caesar to be a god. And this was a surprising move considering that the last thing that the Senate did in relation to Julius Caesar was stab him to death.

But, sure enough, Julius, Augustus, and numerous other emperors were declared and decreed to be gods after they died, and they were even worshipped as gods in what was known as the Imperial Cult.

And that sounds weird, right? We enlightened modern people would never do this, right?

Well, you might be surprised to learn that right now, on the interior ceiling of the duomo of the United States Capital Building, there is a fresco entitled *The Apotheosis of Washington* [show [6The Apotheosis of Washington](#)]. As the title suggests, the work envisions Washington as one exalted unto divinity. He is not alone but rather surrounded by various pagan deities of Roman religion—gods like Neptune and goddesses like Minerva.

Yet, despite these pagan images, Washington himself is cast with intentionally biblical imagery. He is enthroned within the clouds of heaven, like the “Son of Man” in the book of Daniel chapter seven (Dan 7:13–14); a title that the gospels show us belongs to Jesus.

And notably [show [7The Throne of Washington](#)], the throne Washington sits upon is a subtle rainbow, which is a direct reference to how the throne of heaven is described here in Revelation chapter four (Rev 4:3).

Now, I don’t blame this blasphemy on Washington. No, this image was painted decades after his death. But isn’t it odd that there is an image of one of our presidents on the throne of heaven in the direct center of a building that is technically the center of the US government? It reminds us that we humans still have *an enduring tendency* to exalt the things of this world to a place where only God belongs.

Now, the powers of this world will try to convince your heart that true power lies within the kings and kingdoms of men. And if you put any man or any kingdom of this world on that throne, your heart will be filled with fear and insecurity. For the kings and kingdoms of this world totter and fall every day. They are more fleeting and frail than we could ever know.

But Revelation 4 is written to give us eyes to see that our true King is on a throne that will endure for all ages. We have a hope that cannot be disappointed. We are a kingdom that cannot be shaken (cf. Heb 12:28).

We need to hear and heed the words of the prophets and apostles who could see a vision of God on his throne, high and lifted up, even when the world around them was hurtling toward chaos.

We need to allow the word of God to unveil what is true and impart to us a God-centered view of reality. That is what a true apocalypse can do. That’s what *worship* can do.

Worship opens our eyes and wakes us up to the eternal—to what matters most. So that we may walk in the fear of the Lord—an enduring awestruck wonder before the reality of God. Worship helps us live with the awareness that our lives are, as the church fathers would say, *Coram Deo*—before the face of God.

[3.\) The Timelessness of the Throne of God](#)

Such a vision is nothing less than supernatural. John lives in space and time. He is a man of the first century, and he is worshipping the Lord on the Island of Patmos in his time of exile.

But when he hears the voice of God from heaven, he sees something that must take place “*after this*.” But I take this moment not as much as a singular future event.² Rather, by the power of the Spirit, John witnesses an eternal moment. He sees a vision that is beyond the confines of space and time.

Remember, John sees twenty-four elders before the throne of heaven. And again, virtually all commentators see these twenty-four elders as the twelve patriarchs of Israel and the twelve apostles of the Church [show **8The Twenty-four Elders Casting their Crowns**]. And if that is so, John is witnessing himself as an apostle seated with God in heaven, casting his crown before the throne of glory!

Now, that may sound strange to you. But this is something the Bible has already said about all believers. In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul tells Christians that when we were saved by grace and made alive in Christ, we were also raised up with Christ and seated in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). So right now, if you are a believer, Christ not only abides with you. You abide with him!

Now, maybe you already know this truth in your mind. Maybe you even believe this truth.

But can you *see* it? Can you allow the word of God to form your imagination so that you know that your eternal destiny is with God in heaven? Even when the powers of this world clamor all around us, can you purpose to set your mind on these things that are above?

As Paul writes to in the book of Colossians, ***“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory”*** (Col 3:1–4).

Conclusion

Revelation 4 reminds us that the throne is mighty and powerful and overwhelming and glorious. To even contemplate standing before such a throne may be a scary idea for you. Perhaps all you can think of is how unworthy you are. Perhaps all you can think of is how unclean you feel.

² Some commentators takes the phrase “after this” (μετὰ ταῦτα) to reference the rapture, but nothing in the text or context suggests this. An already established interpretation must be read into an imposed on the text.

And, we should be in awe of the holiness of the Lord, yes. But those in Christ should not cower in shame before the idea of the throne of God. The book of Hebrews tells us we are actually commanded to draw near to this throne with boldness (Heb 4:16).

We are commanded to enter into God's presence in our times of worship. We are commanded to lift up our prayers and let our request be made known to our King.

For we do not get to stand before the throne because *we* are worthy. We stand before the throne because Jesus is worthy. We stand before the throne because he has endured the penalty for our sins and overcome the power of death. We stand before the throne because, by faith, we have been imputed with the very righteousness of God.

That's why we can pray our desires and needs to the one on the throne. We are not praying in our own name. We pray *in the name* of Jesus. For because of Jesus, the throne of heaven is not just a throne of glory. It is also a throne of *grace*.

In fact, if you remember from our passage, the throne of God is described as "*a rainbow*." Why is this the case? Well, like everything else in Revelation, the rainbow is a symbol laden with deep and profound meaning.

Today, the rainbow is, unfortunately, a politicized and polarizing symbol that means something far from what this symbol would have meant to John. For in the Bible, the rainbow is a symbol associated with the story of Noah, the ark, and the end of the great flood [show [9Noah's Sacrifice by Daniel Maclise \(1853\)](#)].

In the book of Genesis, after the waters of the flood subsided, and the family of Noah first places their feet on dry ground, they worship the Lord. And there, at that moment, the Lord speaks and promises that the floods of wrath and judgment are over. He seals this promise and this covenant with the sign of a rainbow in the sky (Gen 9:13).

So too, when John sees the God of heaven enthroned on a rainbow, he knows what this symbol means. It means that the waters of judgment and wrath have subsided for the people of God. It means there is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). For all of God's justice against the powers of sin and death has already been poured out on Jesus. And because of this, God's throne is a throne of grace and mercy—a place where we will find help in our time of need.

I pray, Redeemer Christian Church, that we can behold what the Apostle John once beheld. May we know that the God who is with us now as we worship him is a God who is powerful, who is good, who is just, and who alone is worthy to be on the throne.

May we join in with the song of heaven and the song of creation and glorify him, knowing that he alone is "holy, holy, holy." May we have eyes to see what is real and true in a world of unreality and falsehoods.

May we know and rest in the truth that the God we worship is on his throne, bending all of history and creation to his glory and our good. AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Reflecting on Revelation 4:1–11, what aspects of the heavenly throne room vision stand out to you the most, and how does this portrayal of God's majesty challenge your understanding of His sovereignty and glory?

2. The passage describes the twenty-four elders casting their crowns before the throne of God in worship. What do you think this act symbolizes, and what does it teach us about humility and reverence in our own worship?

3. In Revelation 4, the four living creatures continuously proclaim the holiness of God. How does their unceasing worship inspire us to cultivate a lifestyle of reverence and adoration toward God in our daily lives?

4. The vision of the heavenly throne room provides a stark contrast to earthly displays of power and authority. How does this passage challenge our perceptions of power and authority in the world, and how should it shape our allegiance as followers of Christ?