

He is Worthy! (Part 1)

Revelation 4-5

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People are fascinated with heaven. Honestly, I think as things get even worse in our world that fascination begins to ratchet up. And it's really not surprising since the Bible itself refers to heaven more than 500 times. It's not uncommon for people to even claim that they have actually visited heaven in a vision and they've returned to tell us all that they saw. Several years ago a couple of books made the rounds across the Christian world written by authors who made that very claim. The most famous, that which claimed that a young boy had visited heaven, was eventually debunked as a deceptive creation of his father.

But you and I have a distinctive and great privilege because in the Scripture we have several inspired accounts from trusted sources, God's Old Testament prophets and Christ's New Testament apostles, describing heaven, describing what you and I would see if God allowed us that same privilege. And so while He isn't going to give each of us that opportunity until we die or Christ returns, in the meantime we have an inspired record of several visions of heaven.

And I want to begin by showing you these, keep your finger there in Revelation, we're coming back there in a moment, but turn to Exodus, Exodus 24. This is the first of the biblical records. Exodus 24:9 says,

Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they saw God, and ate and drink.

Wouldn't you love to have been there? Well, if you're in Christ, someday you will.

Let's turn to the second one. It's much more familiar. It's Isaiah 6, Isaiah 6:1,

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him,

each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said,

“Holy, Holy, Holy, is Yahweh of hosts,
The whole earth is full of His glory.”

And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

Turn over to the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 1 we have, really, the fullest Old Testament description of heaven and of God’s throne. We’re going to make our way back through this chapter as we interact with chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, but let me just point you here. Verse 1 says, “Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.” And then he describes, beginning in verse 4, this storm coming that’s an unusual storm. And as the vision unfolds, he sees what amounts to the chariot throne of God, supported by the cherubim. And eventually he gets a vision of the divine glory. Verse 26,

Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli [*that’s a brilliant blue stone, I have a piece of it in my office*] in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and there was radiance around Him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yahweh. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and then heard a voice speaking.

Turn over to Daniel’s prophecy, Daniel 7. In Daniel 7, we studied this together, but you remember this is one of those great revelations. Verse 9,

“I kept looking
Until thrones were set up,

And the Ancient of Days took His seat;
His vesture was like white snow
And the hair of His head like pure wool.
His throne was ablaze with flames,
Its wheels were a burning fire.

“A river of fire was flowing
And coming out before Him;
Thousands upon thousands were attending Him,
And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him;
The court sat,
And the books were opened.”

And it goes on to describe the death of Antichrist. Verse 13,

“I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming up,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.

“And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His throne is one
Which will not be destroyed.”

Those are all amazing insights into the throne room of God.

But without question, the fullest description of heaven and of all that surrounds the throne of God comes in the section of the Book of Revelation that we begin tonight. Turn back with me

to Revelation chapters 4 and 5. This section, chapters 4 and 5, really begin the heart of this book. Let me read just a portion of it for you, chapter 4 verse 1. This is how it begins,

After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.” Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.

Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say,

“HOLY, HOLY, HOLY IS THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS
AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME.”

And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

Chapter 5 goes on to describe the seven sealed book that the Father holds in His hand and the Lamb who comes to take that book, and, of course, in chapter 6 begins to break those seals.

Together, the great lesson of these two chapters is this, God is infinitely worthy to sit on the universe’s throne and to judge its treacherous rebellion against Him, and He will delegate that judgment to the Son. That’s really the message of these two amazing chapters, God is infinitely worthy to sit on the universe’s throne and to judge its rebellion against Him, and He will delegate that judgment to His Son.

These chapters, in the context of the Book of Revelation, are really a prelude, a prelude to the judgments that God begins to unleash on the earth during the great tribulation. They begin in chapter 6 with the breaking of those seven seals on the title deed to the earth that Christ holds. In these two chapters we have an accurate description of what heaven has always been like, and that’s how we often treat these chapters, right? It’s like this timeless insight into the scenes around the throne, and there’s an element of truth to that. But the events that unfold here in these two chapters are not timeless, they actually occur just before the seven-year tribulation. John here sees events that will begin to transpire, that will initiate, the great tribulation.

Now, the overview of these two chapters, the outline that we will be following, chapter 4 I’ve entitled, The Scene in Heaven, The Father and His Throne. Chapter 5 I’ve entitled, The Search in Heaven, The Lamb and His Book. Now tonight I want us to begin to study, The Scene in Heaven, The Father and The Throne. Now, just to remind you of the context, in chapters 2 and 3 Christ was walking among His churches, He was dictating letters to His churches. In chapter 4 the scene changes dramatically and we see the Father in heaven on His throne. This chapter begins with the apostle’s invitation to God’s throne. He is invited by a major character in this book, whom we’ll meet in a moment, to come into heaven.

Let’s begin by considering when this happened. Notice verse 1 says, “After these things.” In the Book of Revelation this particular phrase, “After these things,” often marks a new vision. It

does so in chapter 7 verse 9, chapter 15 verse 5, chapter 18 verse 1, chapter 19 verse 1, so you can see, again and again, this expression occurs to introduce us to a new vision that John is having. Here, John is referring, when he says “After these things,” to what has just come before, the first vision that he received from Christ. You remember, John’s first vision begins back in chapter 1 verse 10 and it runs through chapter 1, the vision of Christ Himself, you remember, the glorified Christ in all of His glory there in chapter 1. But that vision doesn’t end there. It ends with John hearing Christ, in his vision, dictate the letters to the seven churches. So what he describes in chapters 4 and 5 is a second vision that shortly followed that first vision in which he saw Christ and received the letters. That’s when this happened.

Secondly, let’s consider what he saw. Verse 1 goes on to say, “I looked, and behold a door standing open in heaven.” As this second vision begins, John looked, in the vision, and what he saw was surprising. It arrested his attention. He says, “behold,” he’s surprised to see “a door,” “a door,” literally, the Greek text says, “having been opened in heaven.” In other words, John didn’t see this door when it was actually opened, he saw it already standing open. The picture is like a door set in the sky that clearly marks an entry point into the presence of God. John uses the word heaven, this “door standing open in heaven,” he uses the word heaven 52 times, and all but once he uses it in the singular.

But be careful when you run into this word heaven in the Book of Revelation. It can speak of God’s dwelling place, as it does in chapter 3 verse 12. It can be used of interstellar space, part of the universe that will be destroyed in chapter 21 verse 1. It can even be used of the sky, the atmosphere, in chapter 6 verse 13. But clearly, here this door is opened into the heaven where God Himself dwells, as the rest of these two chapters makes it clear, into the very throne room of God Himself.

Now let me just stop here and comment on something. When you look at chapter 4 verse 1 and you see this invitation to John, “Come up here,” there are some Christians, who believe in the pre-tribulational rapture, who believe that this actually is the rapture of the church, that the command to come up here is Christ’s call to all of His saints at the rapture. Now, let me just say that that is clearly reading into the text, there is no exegetical basis for that. And so I don’t think that’s what we should see here at all. This is an individual invitation, as we’ll see. John takes

him up on it, and the events began to transpire. However, let me just say this, when you look at the rest of Revelation, the evidence confirms that while verse 1 is not the rapture, the believers are gone before the tribulation begins, before these events begin to transpire.

Think of it this way, in chapters 1 to 3, the church is clearly on earth. Right? You have the seven churches, and the word church occurs 19 times in those chapters. In chapters 4 and 5, you have these elders, whom I will argue in a little bit represent the church, they are already in heaven. Now, as you walk through the rest of the Book of Revelation, there are passing references, several passing references, to the saints on earth, but we're not told who those saints are, but we are told that there are multitudes who come to faith in Christ during the tribulation period itself. I think, as we'll walk our way through it, you'll agree, it's far more likely that the saints who we discover on earth during the tribulation are far more likely to be those who come to faith during the tribulation.

Then you come to chapter 19 verses 1 to 10, and you have the marriage supper of the Lamb in heaven before the second coming. And then in chapter 19 you have the church returning with Christ from heaven at His second coming. Chapter 19 verse 11, "I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war." "And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses." So the church is not clearly present on earth from the end of chapter 3 until the second coming in chapter 19. What is the reasonable explanation? That they have been removed, and that they have been removed in the rapture.

Now, before we leave this point, let me just briefly remind you of what the Scripture teaches regarding the pre-tribulation rapture. That's not the major point of this passage, but it occurs, I believe, between chapter 3 and chapter 4. It's not recorded for us, but clearly we're going to meet these people in heaven that I think are the saints. And so, let's talk about Christ's return. Scripture teaches that Christ's return will come in two distinct stages, separated by a seven-year tribulation period. The first stage is the rapture. It comes just before the tribulation begins, Christ will come in the air, He will come for His Saints to take the Saints back to heaven. The passages that deal with this issue all record those realities. Then comes the seven-year tribulation.

At the end of that seven years, there is a second stage. It is called the second coming, or Christ's coming in glory is another way it's sometimes referred to. It comes after the tribulation, Christ will return to the earth, He will put His feet on the Mount of Olives, He will come with His saints, and He will come to defeat His enemies and establish His earthly kingdom. Now, I submit to you, those are clearly two different events. Now, I'm not taking time to defend all of this, if you want that, I did a couple of messages on the rapture back when we did the systematic theology series, you can go back and find that online.

There are several ways that the event called the rapture differs from the revelation in glory or the second coming. You have the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4, you have what is clearly the revelation in glory, the second coming, in Matthew 24 and 25. When you compare them, this is what you discover. In the rapture Christ gathers His own. In the Second Coming the angels gather the elect. In the rapture the resurrection is prominent. In the revelation in glory there's no mention of resurrection. In 1 Thessalonians 4 Christ comes to reward. In Matthew He comes to judge. In the rapture believers depart from the earth. In the revelation in glory unbelievers are taken away. In the rapture unbelievers remain on the earth. In the second coming believers remain on the earth. So there is a great deal of difference between these two events.

So believers then, and the point I want you to get is, there is no rapture in a verse in Revelation in this section. But what I want you to see is that when you look at the first three chapters, the church is clearly on earth. When you look beginning in chapter 4, the church certainly appears to be primarily in heaven and when you get to the end we are coming back from heaven; everything points to the reality of the rapture. So believers then are gone before the tribulation begins. Can I just say, as we study in the weeks to come, the judgments that are unleashed on this earth during the tribulation, and as you reflect on the gathering storm of the wrath of God and of the Lamb, you need to thank the Lord Jesus Christ that He rescues us from the wrath to come.

So, back to our text. Having taken that little aside, we've considered what he saw. I also want to consider whom he heard. Verse 1 says, "and the first voice which I had heard." After John

saw the door, he heard a voice, and he recognized this voice. It was the first voice that he had heard. Go back to Revelation 1:10,

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, [*this is the first vision*] and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches [*and they're listed. Verse 12,*] Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like the son of man.

He goes on to describe the glory of Christ our Lord. So the first voice that John had heard was the voice of the risen glorified Christ. And now when we come to the second vision in chapter 4, Christ is speaking to John again.

Consider, fourthly, what it sounded like. It sounded like it did the first time, verse 1 says, "and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me." Can I say, tongue in cheek, against certain members of a certain convention, that God doesn't whisper when He speaks, it's like a trumpet. It's not softly and appealingly. Rather, it's powerfully, piercingly, commandingly, authoritatively.

Let's consider next what was said. Verse 1 goes on to say, "and this voice said to me, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.'" The Lord gives John a command and the reason. Let's start with the command itself. Notice he says, "'Come up here.'" Now, as I've already argued, this verse isn't describing the rapture of the church. Instead, it is a singular command that Christ gave to John the Apostle, in a vision that he received on the island of Patmos, Christ ordered John to come up and enter through that door standing open in heaven, in his vision, and enter into Heaven itself. What's the reason? He goes on to say, "'and I will show you what must take place after these things.'"

Now that's very important. The very words that our Lord chooses here make it clear that this chapter introduces us to the third great division in this book. Go back to Revelation 1:19, you remember, this outline Christ gave us. Chapter 1 verse 19, "Therefore write," and then there are three divisions in this book. First of all, "the things which you have seen," that's the vision of

chapter 1. And secondly, write “the things which are,” that’s the letters to the existing churches in chapters 2 and 3. And then He thirdly says, write “the things which will take place after these things.” You recognize that expression? That’s the same expression we encounter in chapter 4. So chapter 4 then initiates us to the third great division of this letter. The church age in which we live is reflected in the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. But with chapter 4, we transition from the church age to the very end of time, specifically to the unfolding of the events of the tribulation, to the second coming, the millennium, and the new heavens and the new earth. Now, this third division runs all the way from chapter 4 verse 1, all the way to chapter 22, to the end of the book.

I want you to notice something that just jumps out at me in verse 1, in this reason Christ gives. He says, “I will show you,” notice this, “what must take place after these things.” I wish you could see it in the Greek text because it screams at you. What He says is, He uses, that word must, He uses a Greek word that means necessary, “this is what is necessary to take place.” I love that. The events described in the rest of Revelation are not random, they’re not accidental, they must happen. It is necessary for them to happen because they have been determined by the eternal will of God and written into God’s eternal plan. They must happen. Everything we study in Revelation, write it down, will unfold exactly as we study it here, to the best that we understand it, because it’s written into God’s plan. It is necessary. They must.

Then notice what happened. Verse 2, “Immediately I was in the Spirit.” After John’s first vision ended in chapter 3 verse 22, he had returned to his normal physical senses. But apparently very quickly thereafter he receives this second vision, “Immediately I was in the Spirit.” John MacArthur writes, “John was not swept away into some mystical fantasyland but transported spiritually into the reality of heaven.”

Now that brings us, having seen the apostle’s invitation to God’s throne, that brings us to the startling revelation of God’s throne in verses 2 and 3, the startling revelation of God’s throne. First of all, we encounter the throne of God. Verse 2 says, “and behold, a throne was standing in heaven.” As John entered that open door, what he saw was astonishing. It was breathtaking. It caused him to exclaim, “behold.” That door, as he walked through that door set in the sky that was in his vision, his entrance into heaven itself, that door opened into a vast area of

indescribable beauty. And there in the center of that massive area was the throne of God. This throne, by the way, is not only the center of heaven, but it's the center of this chapter. In many ways, it's the center of this book because it's mentioned 37 times in Revelation, in almost every chapter, 11 times just here in chapter 4. John doesn't want us to forget, as we encounter this letter, that there is a throne in heaven above all other thrones.

Now, because God is a spirit, we should think of this throne, not primarily as a piece of furniture, but as a symbol, it is a symbol of God's right to rule. It's a symbol of His sovereignty, of His authority. At the same time that I say that, it's also true that our Lord Jesus Christ still retains His human nature. He still as a human body and a human soul, as well as His divine nature. It's possible that while at times the throne of God is symbolic, merely representing His sovereign rule, there may also be a physical place from which our Lord Jesus Christ rules in His human nature. We'll just have to wait and see, won't we? In Ezekiel 1, we read it a moment ago, or portions of it, God's throne there is pictured as a great chariot throne with wheels like centrifuges that sweep across the plain, like a thunderstorm that comes across the land of Israel supported by the Cherubim, great moving chariot throne.

But in this vision it's "standing," notice that, it's "standing in heaven." In other words, it's fixed, it's permanent. Why would that be? Because it reminds us that God's rule of the universe is unshakable. His throne is secure and eternal, His sovereignty can never be challenged. Think of it this way, if every person who's ever lived, in our times the seven billion people on this planet, the billions that have lived before us, and if the Lord carries, the billions that will come after us, if all of them rose up as one man, if all of the angels, the millions upon millions of angels, were to revolt against God and were to join with that human rebellion, and every intelligent being in the universe were to mount their rebellion against the throne of God, it would have no more effect on the throne of God than a small drop of water on the rock of Gibraltar. He is unshakeable. His throne stands in heaven. That's the throne.

That brings us next to the person of God. Verse 2 says, "and I saw One sitting on the throne." John didn't merely see the throne, he saw the King. He saw the eternal God, the creator of all things, the Almighty. And what did he see? Verse 3, "And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance." That's the description. Now, did you notice what's missing

in this description? We're not told what form God appears in? Why doesn't John describe the one on the throne as having a human form, like in Ezekiel's description? You remember, Ezekiel 1:26, "on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man." Why doesn't he describe God like that? Because of the context. In the context of Revelation 5, John must be referring here to the Father. Why do I know that? Because in the next chapter we meet the Son, in chapter 5 verse 7 He comes up to the one on the throne. So the one on the throne here is the Father. And since it's the Father, it's not surprising that John doesn't see him in human-like form. The Father is a spirit. When the Father is presented, He is most often pictured as brilliant, blazing, blinding light, sometimes refracted in prism-like colors into everything around. I think that's the best way to understand the description that John gives us in verse 3.

Look at it again, "He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance." There's debate about these stones. When you consider the jasper stone, the modern jasper stone is an opaque stone. That doesn't appear to be the picture here. But in chapter 21 verse 11 of Revelation, this same stone is described as "crystal-clear." And so, many expositors, and I would have to agree, say this is likely a diamond. As the blazing glory of God shines through it, just like a diamond, it brilliantly refracts all the colors of the spectrum. Can you imagine that scene? How better to describe the radiant glory of God than that? Most scholars agree that the second stone is the sardius, as it is in our translation, or the modern carnelian. It's named after the city of Sardis, near where it's found. The color of the stone, as you can see, is blood red.

Now, what is the significance of the stones, and later we'll see a rainbow of green? Are those just colors? Some commentators argue that the details in this vision, including the colors, are simply meant to give you this overall impression, this big picture of splendor, and the colors themselves have no specific meaning. I'm just not convinced that's true. I tend to agree with others who say that's very unlikely. The Holy Spirit doesn't waste words and when you look at how these colors express themselves in other places in Scripture, I think there is something being said through the color itself. So what does this blood red color, describing God's person, communicate about Him? Well, clearly, it pictures the radiant, brilliant beauty of God's glory, like the diamond does.

At the same time, I think there's another picture here. I think it may very well symbolize God's wrath. Remember what's about to happen. Remember this scene, this is not a scene of the way things always are in heaven, this is a scene, in chapters 4 and 5, of what will transpire just before God wreaks havoc on this planet in judgment through His Son. And so, I think it's likely that this fire, the fiery red stone, and even, we saw, that fiery red in the picture in Ezekiel when God was about to bring judgment into the land. I think that's the picture here. I think it symbolizes God's wrath as it's about to be unleashed.

John's vision of heaven's throne and the one who occupies it is certainly a picture of blazing brilliance, of blinding light reflecting through a massive diamond and a blood red stone. It's a picture of God's glory, but it's also a reminder of the fire of His looming wrath. Dr. Thomas, in his commentary on Revelation, writes this, "The same mixture of white light with fire pervades the Old Testament and apocalyptic visions of the divine majesty. The picture is that of God's anger, kindled because of His holy nature reacting to the prevailing sinfulness of mankind, resulting in the judgment that He's about to send upon the earth." You can see it in the stone, can't you? You can see the picture, the reality, that God, for all of His patience, is also just, He's also holy, He's also righteous, and He must act. It's the picture of the end of Psalm 2 where it talks about kissing "the Son, lest He be angry with you, and you perish in the way," and he says, do so quickly, because "His wrath may [*what?*] soon be kindled." That's the picture that we see of God on the throne.

Next, John's eyes turn to the magnificent setting around God's throne. We've seen the apostle's invitation to God's throne, the startling revelation of God's throne, and now we see the magnificent setting around God's throne. Beginning in the middle of verse 3 and running down through verse 8 reveals what he heard and saw, not on the throne, not the throne itself, but rather surrounding God's throne. Notice the language, how it changes. The middle of verse 3, "around the throne," verse 4, "Around the throne," verse 5, "Out from the throne," "before the throne," verse 6, "before the throne," "in the center and around the throne." So you can see that his line of sight as he walks through that door set in the sky and enters the great throne room, the massive throne room of heaven, and he sees all of the angels and everything else assembled, his mind's eye goes first in this vision to the throne and then to the one sitting on the throne.

And having seen God in all of His glory, he glances down and begins to see all that surrounds God. And as he looks around God's throne, first of all, he sees an emerald rainbow. Verse 3 says, "and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance." Now, the Greek word translated around here can mean encircling. And so some think that this is not the shape of a traditional rainbow like you and I think, but rather like a halo encircling God's entire throne. That's possible. But considering the description in Ezekiel, I think it's best to see this as a more traditional rainbow arc or semicircle. Listen to Ezekiel 1:28 again, "As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance."

Now typically, a rainbow consists of seven colors, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. But this rainbow consists of one color in different hues and shades, it's emerald green. There's full consensus on this color, it's emerald green. So what is this? What is the significance, first of all, of this rainbow? Well, at a basic level, it again illustrates the splendor or the glory of God. But from the beginning, from Genesis 9, the rainbow has symbolized what? It has symbolized two realities. On the one hand, it symbolizes God's judgment, He brought the flood that destroyed all of mankind. On the other side, it symbolizes hope for those who find deliverance, who enter into covenant with Him. And I think both of those are pictured here.

What's the significance of it being emerald green? Well, many believe that it points to God's mercy and grace, a color that at times is connected to God's mercy and grace. So the idea here is that as His wrath builds and is about to be poured out on the earth, this green rainbow is a reminder that His wrath will never come at the expense of His promises to those with whom He has entered into covenant. Aren't you glad? This is a reminder that God never forgets His own, that He will preserve His own from His own wrath. I love that line in the Thessalonian epistle, that's why I include it in the song Sheila and I wrote, I love that line that "He rescues us from the wrath to come." So he saw an emerald rainbow, a reminder on the one hand that God judges that God is just and He will deal with sin, but on the other, hope, hope of salvation and deliverance for those who will accept His offer, for those who would go into the ark, for those in the New Testament era who will go into the arc of His Son.

Secondly, he saw 24 elders, verse 4, “Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.” Now the picture here is of God’s throne raised up, as we saw in Isaiah 6, elevated, supported by, as we’ll see, these living creatures with this sort of sea beneath His feet. And then encircling that is this next layer. In a concentric circle, we have these different layers, and the next layer, the next group if you will, are these 24 elders.

Who are these 24 elders sitting on 24 thrones? Well, let me tell you, there are two distinct views regarding the identity of the 24 elders. The first view says that they are an order of angelic beings. Now, those who take this view sort of break into three options. Once you’ve said I think it’s an order of angelic beings, some say it’s an order of angelic beings, representatives of the faithful of all ages. In other words, they sort of stand in for faithful believers. Others say no, they are representatives of the Old Testament priestly orders. Remember, there were 24 priestly orders in the Old Testament, according to Chronicles. The most likely view, I think, of this one, is the third one, which says no, it’s just a special class of angelic beings of which God only created 24. That is a view that is commonly held by even people we respect and admire. That’s one view.

The second view is, no, these 24 elders are representatives of redeemed humans. And again, there are three sort of subgroups of who these redeemed humans are. Some say they are representatives of Israel. Some say, no, they’re representatives of the church. And a third group says they are representatives of both. I’m going to argue for the fact that these 24 elders are representatives of redeemed humans and specifically of representatives of both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers. And the way we’re going to argue is work our way through this text. Because as we see the clues that are provided here in this text, for me, they are thoroughly convincing and I hope they will be for you as well. So let’s look at the clues we have here as to who these 24 elders are.

First of all, notice verse 4, “Around God’s throne were twenty-four thrones.” What does thrones imply? What does God’s throne imply? What did we just see? Ruling. Reigning. So that means whoever these elders are, they are engaged in ruling and reigning. Scripture nowhere describes angels as ruling and reigning. In fact, Hebrews 1:14 says they are servants of

the redeemed. But saints are often described as ruling with Christ. Listen to chapter 2 verse 26, to Thyatira, the Lord says,

‘He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM, [*these are saints*] I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received authority from My Father’

Go back to chapter 3 verse 21, “““He who overcomes,””” again believers, “““I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.””” Look at chapter 5, chapter 5 verse 10, ““You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”” That’s those who have been redeemed, ““You made them to be a kingdom and priests; and they will reign.”” Go over to chapter 20, chapter 20 verse 4, “Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” So, no record of angels ruling and reigning, lots of evidence of believers ruling and reigning. These 24 elders sit on thrones symbolizing rule.

Look back in our text and you’ll see in verse 4 we read, “and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting.” Notice the word elders. The Greek word elder simply means to be older, or in some cases to be old, but it can just mean older. This Greek word is never used of angels anywhere in Scripture. In fact, it’s really inappropriate for angels because angels don’t age. It’s always used in Scripture of older men, the elders of Israel, and the elders of the church. That’s it. That doesn’t fit angels, but it does fit if it’s relating to believers, because you had elders in Israel and you have elders in the church.

Look at verse 4, it goes on to say, “they are clothed in white garments.” Now, that can be true of angels, John 20:12 for example, John records at the resurrection there was an angel in white. But in Revelation, white garments most frequently described the saints. In chapter 3 verse 5, the believers in Sardis are in white garments. In chapter 3 verse 18, unbelievers in Laodicea are urged to come to faith and receive these white garments from Christ. And in chapter 19 verse 8,

at the marriage supper of the lamb, Christ's bride will be clothed in "fine linen, bright and clean." Again, this one could be angels, but most often in Revelation it is the saints.

Verse 4 goes on to say, "and golden crowns on their heads." God never promises angels they will receive crowns and Scripture never describes them as wearing them. But believers are described this way. By the way, the Greek word translated crown here is the word *stefanos*. It's the wreath crown that was given to winners at the games. It's not the diadem that Christ Himself wears. Instead, it's a *stefanos*, it's a reward for a race well run. This was the crown Christ promised faithful believers in the church in Smyrna. Look back at chapter 2, chapter 2 verse 10, He says, ""Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the *stefanos*, the crown of life.""

So when you put all of the evidence together, I'm convinced that the 24 elders are not an order of angelic beings, but represent believers. So that raises the question, why 24? Well, 24 often represents a larger group in Scripture. For example, in 1 Chronicles 24, ironically, there are 24 officers in the sanctuary representing the 24 courses of Levitical priests. In 1 Chronicles 25 there are 24 divisions of singers in the temple representing the people of God singing together. So the 24 elders are representatives of a much larger group of redeemed humans. But again, that raises another question, who exactly are these believers that the 24 elders represent? Possibly they are only New Testament believers. That's a view, again, that some scholars and teachers that we respect would take, that these 24 are only New Testament believers. However, I tend to think that they represent all believers of both Old Testament and New Testament. Think about this, 12 represent the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel, which in turn represent all true believers in Israel. Even though they are not part of the rapture of the church, their redeemed spirits are already in heaven at this point. The other 12 represent the 12 apostles, which in turn represent the New Testament church.

And if you think I'm sort of making this up, I'm not. Look at chapter 21. Revelation 21 tells us that when it comes to the construction of the new Jerusalem, the capital city of the new earth, notice it has, in verse 12, "It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates," "and names were written on those gates, which are the names of [*what?*] the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel."

Look down in verse 14, “And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on those foundation stones were written the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” So to me, when you see that it meshes very well with the 24 elders that we have met back in chapter 4. So these are gathered around the throne. Just think about that for a moment. If in fact, as I believe, and I hope I’ve convinced you, these 24 elders represent us, that means we’re there. We’re seeing what theologians call the beatific vision. We’re seeing the glory of God as John saw it. We are amazed, captured in rapt wonder, as we see the glory, the blazing, blinding, brilliant glory of God refracted across heaven in all the colors of the spectrum.

Well, we’re just beginning our journey through heaven. Lord willing, we will continue it next week, but we need to finish. So let me finish with just some basic implications of what we studied tonight. These just jumped out at me from just the verses we studied together. First of all, heaven is more real than you know. This planet, it seems real, doesn’t it? But it’s one day going to be destroyed, 2 Peter 3:10. The entire universe will be uncreated, according to Revelation 20:11. But the heaven where God dwells is eternal, His throne is unshakable. This is reality.

Secondly, God is more magnificent than you know. He’s more magnificent because of His unlimited sovereignty, because of His incomparable glory, because of His approaching just wrath and because of His matchless grace. He’s more magnificent than you know. Thirdly, the future is more certain than you know. The future of the world only includes those things that God has determined must take place, that it’s necessary to take place. Can I just tell you, when you read, whatever your news source is, just relax. The future is more certain than you know. Number four, grace is more amazing than you know. The 24 elders represent believers just like us. In other words, we, you, believer, will be there. You will see what John saw. And not just for a brief time in a vision, but in person, forever. Number five, Christ is more worthy than you know. He’s the one, and the only one, who made it possible for sinners like us, who should be incinerated in the presence of a holy God, to live with Him as His Children.

And number six, the gospel is more valuable than you know. If you’re here tonight and you don’t know Jesus Christ, listen, what on earth, what is it that you’re after in this life that will even come close to satisfying your soul like God your Creator? He’s offered to you in the

gospel of Jesus Christ. You can know Him, you can be forgiven of your sins, you can enter into relationship with Him as Father, if you will simply repent of your sins and put your faith in the work of His Son, in His life, death, and resurrection as your only hope of being right with God. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man comes unto the Father, but by Me.” The end of this letter is an invitation, “Come, come, whoever wants to drink from the water of life, let him come.” Let me say to you, come and drink. The gospel is far more valuable than you know. Let’s pray together.

Father, You know how often I tell You about my own inadequacies. How often I admit to You that I cannot do what You’ve called me to do unless You enable me to do so. But Father, there are certain passages, there are certain scenes, that I feel the most inadequate of all. Lord, this is certainly one of them. But I pray that You would take Your powerful word and my efforts to explain it and You’ll use it in all of our lives. Father, help us to really see, with the eyes of faith, things as they are, and may everything here look like the trash it is in comparison to the glory that awaits us. We pray in Jesus’ name, amen.