

ST. PAUL LUTHERAN, CALEDONIA SUNDAY ADULT CLASS

Book of Revelation, Chapter 4 Notes and Discussion Questions

Chapter 4 begins with the second major portion of the book. Most all of Scripture and the first three chapters of Revelation view earth from the eternal perspective -- which is difficult for Christians and impossible for unbelievers to understand. Now we view heaven and eternity from the heavenly perspective. Since heaven and eternity are entirely outside of our experience at this time, these things viewed from the unfamiliar heavenly perspective are even more difficult to understand.

No longer do we see Jesus Christ as the Suffering Servant, the Humble Savior; difficult as these are to understand. Now we see Christ who, in the same kind of glory we shall have through Him, is undisputed ruler of the universe, to whom even every atom of the creation bows in wonder and awe and who commands the power to cause the universe to cease to exist in the twinkling of an eye -- and can bring it back even more quickly. Since John must use the words of earth with their references to time and space in speaking of heaven where there is no time and space (it is eternal) we must be very careful in understanding the "intended sense" of each passage. (See especially these two Principles of Biblical Interpretation- 4. The Holy Spirit is the writer and only safe interpreter of Scripture. The interpreter is merely to set forth the meaning of the Holy Spirit. The so-called "inner light" dare not be used as a rule for interpreting Scripture 6. Every word in the Holy Scriptures can have only one intended meaning in any one place and in any one relation..

Chapters 4 and 5 are the prelude and introduction to the rest of the book. We may call these two chapters "Reel 1" of history, in order to better understand their relationship to the rest of the book. The word "reel" is used here with reference to the old film reels. Each reel views different events with a unique focus and for a particular purpose. Reel 1 takes place in Heaven before the throne of the Lamb who initiates the great final conflict with the forces of evil. The outcome, because He was already victorious at Calvary, is the final triumph of the Lamb, while Satan is confined to the lake of fire. Reels 2 through 7 can be diagramed on a historical time line because they present, from the heavenly perspective, events that take place in earthly history between the time of the writing of the book of Revelation until the final return of Christ.

Outline of Revelation 4 - 5

1. Chapters 4-5: Reel One
 1. 4:1-5: The players
 2. 4:6-11: The setting
 3. 5:1-7: Who shall open the Book?
 4. 5:8-14: Worship of the Lamb

With John we stand before the throne of Almighty God.

4:1 -- John was in exile on Patmos - it was a Sunday (Rev. 1:9-10) when He was invited by God to come and see, in heaven, what shall take place on earth.

"Voice...like the sound of a trumpet" -- the voice is loud and clear, not just a "feeling" or an intuition.

"Come. . . ." -- an invitation - but what Christian refuses God's invitation?

"up here" -- not in the same sense as the space shuttle goes up. We see very little of our own created universe - we can see very little of the light spectrum and hear only a small portion of the sound spectrum - and beyond the created is heavenly which is just as real and solid as our own universe which we perceive so little of.

"Take place after these things" -- Literally "after this" (plural) hence "these things" - from the Sunday after this vision into the future. By the end of the book of Revelation it is clear that these events John is about to see from heaven's perspective will take place between the Sunday on which this vision took place and the end of this creation.

4:2 - "In the Spirit." -- John speaks not of a trance but He was "in the Spirit" in heaven. This is a gift of God given to the Apostles to equip them for their unique office. Many claim to be "in the Spirit" today but a comparison of what they "learn" while "in the Spirit" with what the Spirit of God teaches in Scripture indicates that their spirit and the Holy Spirit have not compared notes lately. Matthew 22:43 refers to David being "in the Spirit" (he was also a prophet) when he wrote by inspiration. (See comments on Rev. 1:10).

"A throne standing in heaven . . ." God in the seat of His glory. If you ask "How does God who is a Spirit sit on a throne?" then remember that when someone asked Luther what God was doing before Creation, Luther answered, "He was creating switches to use on people who ask foolish questions." The Old Testament regularly features the image of God ruling from His throne.

4:3 - "He . . . was like a Jasper" - Probably a diamond; sardius (sardine stone or carnelian) a dark red brilliant gem; a rainbow like an emerald, in plainer language: a brilliant deep green halo. Here we see God, who is the light that illumines heaven (Rev. 21:23) in all His Glory. We are reminded in the diamond of the brilliant hues it gives off. The sardius with its deep red reminds us of majesty and judgment. Green is the color of comfort presenting us with grace, hope and peace. Green is also the color of life. We must remember that this is an attempt to make human words carry descriptions which defy human experience and senses. God dwells in unapproachable light and is One "Whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:16). Compare this description with Ezekiel 1:26-28.

4:4 -- "24 thrones . . . 24 elders" - Human beings who worship God (4:10). 12 is the number of the Old Testament Church (12 tribes) and 12 is the number of the New Testament Church (12 Apostles). Some commentators also see in the number 24 the 24 courses of priests in I Chronicles 24:3-19, in which case we are talking again about the ministry of the Word in both the Old and New Testament. In either case we have represented here elders of the Church from both Old and New Testament times, representing the entire body of believers throughout the history of the world.

"Clothed in White Garments" -- again white means holiness, available to humans only through the work of Christ - ours through grace by faith. But they have more than this holiness of Christ's; by faith they have "golden crowns" - the crown of victory. The victory here is their victory over sin, death, and their flesh - which in Christ, they overcame (2:17, 3:5, 3:21). And so they were rewarded with authority and glory (2:26).

Here then, we have people such as ourselves, who have been leaders in Christ's Kingdom from the very beginning of the world, in proclaiming the Word, and in the process overcoming the world, the devil and their own flesh through the exercise of their faith. While the number 24 represents both the Old Testament and the New Testament Church, it doesn't necessarily follow that we have here the 12 patriarchs and the 12 Apostles. Matthew 20:20-23 confirms that overcoming in faith is a prerequisite of sitting in these thrones. But it also indicates that the Father gives these places as He sees fit.

4:5 - "Lightning's & voices & peals of thunder." -- A clear display in every form possible of God's Almighty authority -- God here is ready to hold judgment. Many times Jesus Christ makes it clear in the Gospels that while our various excuses for lack of service, or just plain neglect of the Word, will appease men who cannot see into the heart, before God no one will dare offer any excuse. Personal confrontation with this Authority will make that impossible -- for example, Matt. 22:12. This same awesome display of God's majesty and power was seen at Sinai (Exodus 19:16--19). In Revelation thunder and lightning are always connected with an important event at the heavenly temple: the opening of the seventh seal, 8:5; the sounding of the seventh trumpet, 11:19; the seventh bowl of God's wrath, 16:18.

"Seven Spirits of God" -- The sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit (See Acts 2:3 and Rev 5:6). The Greek may also be translated "the sevenfold Spirit." Some commentators are inconsistent in identifying this with Rev. 1:4 where we have the Seven Spirits of the Seven Churches. This point in the end is an open question. The Seven Spirits of the Seven Churches may or may not be the same as the Sevenfold gifts of the Spirit here. The Seven lamps represent the working and gifts of the Holy Spirit in much the same way as seven candles on each side of the altar. From Isaiah 11:2 we learn the seven gifts are: Spirit, wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of God.

4:6 -- "And before the throne & as it were, a sea of glass like crystal." John is here comparing what was on the approach to the throne to shiny, smooth crystal, when he says "as it were" which means "very much like." Some commentators add that in the surroundings of judgment here is a representation of the peace we have with God through the forgiveness of sins, purity, glory and joy which those who rely on Christ will know even in God's awesome presence. It is not unfitting to see the comfort of the Gospel in this way.

4:6b--8a -- the Four Winged Creatures -- Over twenty different interpretations have been offered to explain what these creatures represents, not to mention the interpretation that says that this is a flying saucer! On passages like this it seems everyone tries to find his own pet ideas represented. Interpreting passages in this way is not fair to the text (rules of interpretation #s 2,4,5,6,7,11,12). Of such passages Luther wrote in the last years of his life, "Many have tried their hands at it, but until this very day they have attained no certainty. Some have even brewed it into many stupid things out of their own heads." (In his "Preface to the Revelation of St. John," 1546.)

A step--by--step interpretation of this passage:

1. Is it figurative or literal? Only the text itself can tell us this. The text (v.6) says that they were (literally) "in the middle of the throne and encircling the throne." We have already discussed the

problem of time and space in heaven. To take this literally would leave us with either all these creatures piled on top of God on His throne -- which is silly or with a vision of God and these spiritual creatures all mixed together in a sort of indefinite mass. Therefore we must conclude that we have figurative language. (Rule 11).

2. If this is figurative language, what is the point of comparison? (Principles of Biblical Interpretation Rule 12). What are known Biblical points which we can compare to points here? The number four is biblically associated with the earth itself (Rev. 7:1, 20:8) and therefore represented here is an attribute of God (all things flow from Him) which deals with earth. "Full of eyes in front and behind" signifies omniscience, and God's care for His people. It is through the eyes that facts are established and righteous judgment maintained according to Scripture.

In a vision Ezekiel also saw four living creatures, each of which had four faces (Ezekiel 1:4--10) -- human, lion, ox and eagle. Perhaps the simplest and most generally encompassing conclusion we can draw here is that we have an image of God's providence as it guides earthly history. This does not mean that there is no special office of creatures which John describes here that God has created for the purpose of executing His providence.

While more detailed explanations of the descriptions of these creatures symbolically represented here vary greatly, we will stick with those features which are here described and elsewhere explained in Scripture. We appear to have here a visual representation of qualities that are invisible on earth, and may be noticed only with the discernment of faith, if noticed here at all. Earth history from heaven's viewpoint is presented in reels two through seven in the same way. The qualities of those events from the viewpoint of eternity the event's spiritual ramifications -- are presented. Like these creatures, these events look very different from our earthly viewpoint than they do from the view in heaven.

4:8a -- "Six wings" -- is explained in Isaiah 6:2. Two wings to cover the face in reverence, two to cover the feet in modesty, and two for flying. Again, while the language is that of symbols, the reality of these special creatures seems to be assumed. Their physical appearance is the symbol.

4:8a -- "Day and night" is more language of symbol, for we know that there is no day or night in heaven. (Rev. 21:25, 22:25). This simply signifies an unbroken chain of praising God. Their praise is contained in verse 8b.

4:8b -- "Holy, Holy, Holy" -- 3 holies: one for each Person of the Trinity. He is Holy and He makes us holy by faith in Jesus Christ.

"Lord God Almighty" -- 3 again, there can be no question that the only true God is to be identified as the Trinity. This is a very basic fact of God Himself, Who and what He is. The first 3 verses of Genesis already teach the Trinity. Hence all religions which teach only about "God" but refuse to acknowledge the Trinity of the Father who created us, the Son who redeemed us, and the Holy Ghost who sanctifies us (Holy, Holy, Holy) are false. This is the basis of our opposition any group which talks about God but refuses to acknowledge Him as the Trinity with the heavenly hosts and all the men of faith of all ages. (See Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; Numbers 6:24--26).

Three major points:

- * He is the Lord, in that He alone is the ruler of the universe.
- * He is God, in that He alone is worthy of all worship.
- * He is Almighty, in that He can do all things and will do all that He says He will. (See notes on 1:8).

"Who was and is and is to come" -- This is really a longer expression of God's Name (Exodus 3:14--15). He always was, is, and always will be. That we exist proves that He is (see Acts 17:23--32, an example of apologetics). And He has always been and always will be. Even those who do not believe in God must call upon some supernatural force to explain the world and life (Aristotle's "unmoved mover;" modern science's "vital force" and "genetic predestination").

4:9 -- The created Heavenly hosts, creatures as we are, also sing His praises out of joy, and even on their part thankfulness to be alive by the Hand of God.

4:10 -- 24 Elders -- The 24 Elders of the Church on earth for all time worship Him along with the heavenly creatures. The heavenly agents of God's providence and the earthly agents of the ministry of the Word serve to honor God and give Him glory.

"lay their crowns before the throne" -- they lay their crowns of victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil at the feet of God -- taking no credit for themselves, but giving all credit to God. This is the ultimate worship that we strive for even here on earth.

4:11 -- God, as ever-living Creator of all, is worthy of all. For without Him we would never have existed. And when we sinned, because God was our Creator He also became man to redeem us. The teaching of creation and redemption cannot ever be separated from one another. God willed that we exist and created us by His Word. After sin He also willed our Holiness once again and brings this about by His same Word. See Hebrews 1:1--3 and Psalm 115.

Study and Discussion Questions for Revelation 4

1. The Gospel is foolishness to those who do not believe, so says St. Paul. How impossible this 4th chapter must be for those who do not know Christ! How has this chapter helped you as a Christian spiritually and/or for your life here on earth?

2. We shall all approach Holy God's throne which we have pictured for us here. Shall you do so with fear, despair, confidence, hopelessness, awe? (Circle those which apply to you).

3. What are some groups which profess belief in "God" but do not believe in the Trinity? Can a person be saved if he does not believe in the Trinity?

4. What is meant by "apologetics"? Can it be used to prove that Jesus is Savior?

5. In what ways can you praise and thank God that you exist and for your salvation already in this life?