

Is God Doing Anything

~ Revelation 4

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A mom and dad look at each other after another difficult day with their child. They've been struggling for a while trying to figure out what's going on. They recognize that these struggles have put a strain on their marriage. They've asked God for help or healing for their child. But it seems like every direction they turn leads to a dead end. Where is God's direction?

A wife or husband wakes up to another day in a struggling marriage. They have prayed earnestly for their spouse. They have asked God to intervene and bring change so they can experience joy. But there's been no change – for years. The wife or husband wonders “Is God doing anything?”

A worker gets in their car for their daily commute to their job. It's been stressful there the past while. They're talking about cutbacks. But the communication from management has been scarce to non-existent. This employee has followed Christ for years. They've prayed for God's direction about whether to stay or look for something different. But there seems to be no answer. What is God up to?

A young person faces choices about their future. Graduation approaches. Some of their peers seem so certain about their path in life. But they're unsure. They don't even know what they're really interested in or where they're skilled. They've prayed once in a while for God to show them the way. But they haven't heard anything. Why won't God answer?

A young adult has several important questions going through their mind. What should they do in their lives? Will they find someone to marry? Is this faith of their parents really something they can affirm? They've asked God for His help to sort these things out. But nothing comes back very clear. Does God even care about their questions?

When you think of your life, there may be questions, areas or situations that you've brought to God. But nothing changes. Or you're not sure whether He's given you an answer. You maybe wonder if God is awake, hearing, watching and doing anything.

Well I'm here to tell you today friends that God is actively at His work right now. He never stops doing His work. In fact, Jesus Himself testified in John 5:17 “My Father is always at His work, to this very day and I too am working.” God constantly moves forward on His plans for the world and for our lives. I want to strengthen our belief in this today. I pray you will gain hope and peace in the situations you currently face where you may not see any progress.

This belief-strengthening evidence will come to us in the next chapter of our Revelation study. We've just completed Jesus' message to the 7 churches. There were some challenging symbols to interpret and some harder things to understand. But we could kind of relate to them. After all, many of the New Testament letters follow a similar pattern.

But from now on in Revelation, we leave behind the familiar. Michael Gorman puts it like this. "The book of Revelation now undergoes a dramatic shift from the kind of text we understand fairly easily to the kind of text that may confuse, scare or distress us."¹ We return to the visions given John like the vision of the son of man in Revelation 1. We will remain in them until almost the very end of the book. So we have to adjust our expectations when we come to these texts. We must recognize a human being is trying to communicate visions of heaven and the future. The visions surpass the limitations of language. Yet if we recognize this as we go through the visions, we will more likely understand some of what God has for us in them.

What we will see today can offer us some great comfort and hope especially when it comes to wondering whether or not God is doing something. So let's see what God revealed to John in Revelation 4. (Page 869)

Revelation 4 (ESV)

4 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."² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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,⁶ 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:⁷ 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.⁸ 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!"

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ 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,

¹ Michael Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, (Eugene, OR, Cascade, 2011), 102

¹¹ “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.”

In Revelation 4, the scene changes from earth to heaven. **God brings John into His throne room while John was in the Spirit.** John writes “After this I looked and behold, a door standing open in heaven!” John looks up and sees an open door into heaven. The text literally says “there before me a door standing open.” But what’s he supposed to do?

Then he hears the voice – the same voice he heard in Revelation 1 that sounded like a trumpet. It turns out to be Jesus Himself. The voice states “come up here and I will show you what must take place after this.” This invitation resembles an incident in Exodus in the Old Testament. The people of Israel camp at Mount Sinai. God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He has brought them out as a new nation. Now God and the people will enter into a covenant.

In a scene somewhat similar to what we find in Revelation 4, God invites Moses to come up and be with Him. So listen to Exodus 24:9-12

Exodus 24:9-12 (ESV)

⁹Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

¹²The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.”

God proceeds to give Moses the 10 commandments. So Moses is invited to “Come up to God on the mountain,” to receive the revelation of the 10 commandments. John is invited to “Come up to heaven to see the revelation of the things that must soon take place.” In verse 2 of Revelation 4, John states, “At once I was in the Spirit.” This is the same language used in Revelation 1 when John says he was in the spirit on the Lord’s Day. It points to some sort or spiritual experience or vision. I would interpret this to mean that John did not bodily go up to heaven. Somehow the Spirit brought him to see. So God brings John into His throne room by the Spirit. We now get to see inside.

What is happening in the heavenly throne room of God? First of all we see **God sits on the throne and rules the universe.** Verse 2 – “and behold a throne with one seated on the throne.” A throne symbolizes sovereignty, rule and power. Notice the throne is not empty. Nor is the one seated on the throne sleeping. That would be disturbing. John

gets to see the Lord God Almighty asleep on the throne. But God is seated on the throne meaning He is actively engaged in ruling. A ruler on the throne in the ancient world would hear news about the kingdom and world, consult the royal court on response and make decisions and laws. Then he or she would assign members of the court to carry out the decisions or announce the laws and enforce them.

But how do we know this is actually God on the throne? John doesn't identify Him. He doesn't name Him. Commentators note that of all the throne room scenes of God in the Bible, John displays the most reserve in naming and describing God. Isaiah said "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up and the train of his robe filled the temple" in Isaiah 6:1. So Isaiah names the Lord but doesn't really describe Him. He just says the bottom of God's robe filled the temple. Ezekiel goes a little further in Ezekiel 1 by describing what God looked like. In Daniel 7, Daniel names God the Ancient of Days and describes God's clothing and appearance. But John does not name God nor does he describe God's form. But John does tell us there is a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it which means they exercise power, rule and authority.

This is what's happening in the heavenly throne room of God. From there God rules the universe. What else is happening? **God's brilliant beauty and awesome power radiate from the throne.** John attempts to describe God. Verse 3 points to God's brilliant beauty. "And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian." These are precious stones. One commentator notes that the lack of scientific terminology among the ancients makes identification of precious stones difficult. Jasper may be the modern jasper but some hold it was a green jade or a green quartz. Some think it may have even been a diamond because in Revelation 21:11, jasper is described as clear as crystal. Carnelian may have been a red stone sometimes called the sardius stone because it came from the region of Sardis. But the point is that God emits or gives off this brilliant colored light.

"And around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald." Ezekiel's vision of the Lord also included an awareness of a rainbow. Ezekiel 1:28 states, "Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain (a rainbow), so was the appearance of brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." In John's vision, the rainbow has an appearance of an emerald which is usually green. All this points to a common characteristic of jasper, carnelian, rainbow and emeralds – color. Gems and a rainbow portray God's beauty clothed in colorful light.

This is someone's attempt to portray what John saw. I will leave that up there for you to ponder as we continue.

John also describes the awesome power radiating from God's throne. verse 5 – "From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder." Ultimately, of course the power radiates from God Himself. But John will not even say it is from God. He simply describes what he can see. So imagine what it must have looked like for lightning to come forth from one who sat on the throne and gave off colorful light. Talk about the ultimate light show! This collection of words also brings us back to Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19, God shows up to meet the people at Mount Sinai. Listen to the description of His arrival in Exodus 19:16 – "On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mount and a very loud trumpet blast so that all the people in the camp trembled." Revelation 4:5 again – "From the throne came flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder." So this is not some quiet throne room like a library. It's almost seems like an active volcano like atmosphere.

As if this wasn't enough, John mentions that "before the throne were seven torches of fire which are the seven spirits of God." We met them back in Revelation 1:4 - Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne." I take the seven spirits to refer to the seven fold nature of the Holy Spirit as referred to back in Isaiah 11:2. So they blaze away in front of God's throne.

Then he mentions in verse 6 that before the throne "there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal." So either glass or water that is still. In Exodus 24, when Moses and the elders went up to God on Sinai, "there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness." Here in Revelation we are told there is a sea of glass like crystal. Water or glass? We don't know for sure. But we do know there was an enormous bronze basin of water mounted on twelve bronze oxen standing in front of Solomon's temple. This bronze basin was called the sea. The priests and worshippers used this basin for ceremonial cleansing before drawing near to God in worship.

So this has led some to think that maybe the sea before God's throne was some sort of reminder that God's people often had to pass through water to get to Him OR get to where He wanted them. The Israelites had to pass through the water of the Red Sea to get to Mount Sinai. Then they had to cross the water of Jordan River to get to the Promised Land. The Old Testament temple worshipper had to pass through the water of the bronze sea to prepare to worship God. New Testament believers pass through the waters of baptism as the initiation into Christ's church. Going through water symbolized leaving behind the life apart from God and coming to God miraculously alive and cleansed.

So this sea is part of brilliant beauty and awesome power of God that John sees. We've asked the question is God doing anything? We have seen into God's throne room through John's eyes. There we have seen God seated on His throne reigning over the universe and our lives. We have seen God's brilliant beauty and awesome power radiate from the throne. There's one more major revelation about what's happening in God's throne room.

Worshippers ceaselessly give glory to one seated on the throne. John reveals to us two sets of worshippers; the four living creatures and the 24 Elders. So let's start with the four living creatures because what they do influences the 24 Elders. In verse 6, John tells us about 4 living creatures around the throne. They were full of eyes in front and behind. That means that they have some supernatural ability to see. Their eyes are directed towards God and towards creation. So they constantly see God and what's happening in the world.

Then he reveals they have the appearance of four creatures in verse 7 – like a lion, like an ox; with the face of a man and like an eagle in flight. These four bear some resemblance to creatures Ezekiel saw in his vision. The most common explanation for the four animals is that they may represent the noblest, strongest, wisest and fastest of nature. The lion is noblest; the ox is the strongest; the human was the wisest and the eagle was the fastest. All worship and serve God. Yet each creature has six wings in verse 8. This may indicate a swiftness to carrying out the will of God. They are likely an exalted order of angels who serve as the immediate guardians around the throne.

But it seems their primary role is to lead the heavenly hosts in worship of the one seated on the throne. "Day and night they never cease to worship." I was thinking about how we think of worship as something to be gotten over with so we can get on with real living. Yet for these living creatures, ceaseless worship of God is real living.

They repeat a simple yet deeply meaningful message. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come." They repeated reference to God's holiness and to give it primary place in their worship should cause us to sit up and take serious notice. Listen, for a moment, to the difference that the repetition makes. Holy is the Lord God Almighty. Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.

Now think about how God's holiness can be a comfort and inspiration to us. One commentator writes "John's readers lived in a world (as do we) where evil was rampant and apparently goodness was weak and frustrated and ineffective. But John's very first vision of heaven shows appearances are deceptive. God is holy. He is completely separate. He is absolutely and uniquely excellent above all creation. He is absolutely pure.

And He is the Lord God Almighty. Remember how John wouldn't name the one seated on the throne? He lets these four creatures do it. This name also reminds us that real power is not with evil, but with God. And He is eternal – “who was and is and is to come.” God has no beginning or end. He is in no way bound by time although He sees events and acts in this world in time. So God sees your entire life right now. God knows what He is working out for good in your and my life through to their end.

God's eternity reminds us that this influence, guidance and support will never end for us. One hard reality in life is that good people in our lives always come to a point where they can no longer lead or influence others. They lose their health or their edge or their lives. They move or we move. People mourn the loss of a good CEO or a good political leader or a good pastor or a good king. We grieve the loss of a mentor or a grandparent or a parent who helped us and guided us in life. But that will never happen with God. God's power and eternal being ensure that his holiness will triumph over evil. His purposes will be accomplished in our lives. These four living creatures direct heaven's hosts to remember all of this and constantly praise the Lord for it.

I wonder how our lives would be different and our perspective changed if we spent more time pondering and worship God for Holiness, Greatness and Eternal Nature.

But the four living creatures are not the only worshippers. John tells us about 24 Elders who sit on 24 thrones that surround the throne of God. Many speculate about their identity. But two options rise above the rest. They could be a heavenly council that is composed along the lines of the 24 priestly divisions in the temple. Or they could be representatives of the people of God throughout history – 12 from the Old Testament representing the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 from the New Testament who are the 12 apostles with Judas replaced by Paul. John tells us they were clothed in white garments – perhaps the color of triumph or holiness. And they had golden crowns on their heads perhaps indicating a victory, a kingdom or achievement in life.

But we soon discover that their identity less important to John than their activity. What do they do in this chapter? Ceaselessly worship the one who sits on the throne. So whenever the four living creatures repeat their “Holy, Holy, Holy” message, the 24 elders, verse 10, “fall down before him who is seated on the throne AND worship him who lives forever and ever. They also cast their golden crowns down before the throne in a gesture that recognizes the Lord's supremacy.

So they lay their kingdom before the Lord. They lay their achievements before Him recognizing the ability to accomplish these came from Him.

Then they proclaim their own message of worship in verse 11. “Worthy are you our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.” Now to us that’s a statement of worship. To first century readers this is politically revolutionary language. “Worthy are you” was the phrase that greeted the emperor in triumphal procession. The emperor Domitian added the phrase “our Lord and God” as a required phrase of greeting. So worshippers in the emperor cult would greet the emperor by saying “worthy are you our lord and god.” But for Christians, only the one upon the heavenly throne was worthy. The worship of the 24 elders was a direct challenge to the worship of the emperors.

Why did they deem the Lord worthy? “For you created all things and by your will they existed and were created.” All things that are, existed first in the eternal will of God and through his will came into actual being at his appointed time – including you and me. With that declaration by the 24 Elders, the first part of this heavenly vision concludes. There will be much more to see next time in Revelation 5.

Why does the Lord God Almighty show John His throne room? Why not just give the vision of the things that must soon take place? I think God does this **to show John His Lordship over the world.** John is in exile on Patmos suffering at the hands of the empire. It looks like the empire rules the world. But John now sees it’s the Lord. Another reason may be that once we get to Revelation 6, we will be looking into the future. Jesus will unveil the things that must soon take place. **Before John is given a vision of the future, he must know who holds the future.** The same is true for you and me. It is unlikely that you and I will receive a vision of our future like the one given to John. But we can learn to trust the one who holds the future.

How might we respond to this vision?

Take comfort that God is seated on the throne ruling over all things including what is happening in your life. God is still in charge. We need to return to this vision of God when we get overwhelmed by earthly emperors or present troubles. God is Lord of history and has everything under His control. This can help us keep a good perspective on life. In this world, we will have trouble. But God still reigns. So if you have trouble at work, God still reigns. God will accomplish His good purposes. If you have challenges in your marriage, God is sitting on the throne and is intimately aware of your troubles even more than the four living creatures with all their eyes. He knows your suffering and your prayers. He will

accomplish His greater purposes in His time for your ultimate good. If you're uncertain about a decision, act on what you know to be God's will. Instead of asking the question "What is God's will for my life," ask "What is God's will?" Colossians 3:17 – And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." Do a search of the Bible on the word "will." You will find lots of direction on the will of God. Usually what happens is Christians present their request to God. They go about living faithful lives to Him until He unveils the next step they need to take. So instead of looking for an answer from God on exactly what to do by a particular deadline, He might be calling you to keep growing in faithfulness. In His time, He will reveal what's next.

Another possible response - **Consider what needs to change for you to unceasingly worship God.** The totality of worship offered by the living creatures and 24 elders invite us to imitate them. Our primary job in heaven will be to worship God. We need to orient our lives to that purpose during our time on earth. If we don't worship and center our lives on God, we will be all over the place with our lives.

Does this mean we need to sit in the church sanctuary 16 hours a day? But it does mean we cultivate a growing awareness of God's presence through every part of our day. Psalm 16:8 states "I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken."

In response to God's holiness, obey Him while earnestly pursuing moral purity. In Isaiah's vision of God, Isaiah recognized his uncleanness not because he compared himself with other worshippers but because he stood before the holy God before whom no mortal creature is adequate. Nothing banishes our pride more than a taste of God's infinite greatness. God is holy alone in his perfection. He calls us to be holy as he is holy. Yet He provides us with His power and grace to grow each day.

What is God doing in and around our lives? We may not fully know that exactly now. But we do know He rules from His throne. His brilliant beauty and awesome power radiates from Him. Worshippers praise Him ceaselessly in heaven for all His glorious attributes. He has eyes on us – along with the four living creature's eyes and the Lord Jesus' eyes and the eyes of the 7 spirits of God. He will accomplish His purposes in our lives. Our job is trust Him and carry on in His strength until He reveals the next step. May the Holy Lord God Almighty be your comfort and strength today and every day until you see Him face to face.