Series: A Call to Worship on Earth as in Heaven (a study in Revelation)
Sermon Text: Revelation 4:4; 6b-11 **Slido Poll:** How would you define worship?

Since we're taking breaks during our Revelation study, we're building a summary paragraph to remind us of what this book is about. Our first summary sentence says: "*Revelation is about what Jesus has been up to since His resurrection, and specifically how He is intimately involved with His churches*." This series in ***chapters 4-5*** will help us develop our next sentence and gain a more biblical understanding of worship. So far, we've discussed some bigger themes related to these chapters, like how **Life is all about what we worship**, how **Revelation should inspire worship, not predictions**, and how **God's self-revelation informs our worship**. As we finish chapter 4 today, we'll discover this fascinating…

BIG IDEA: Heaven's assembly reminds us why God alone deserves worship!

In this sermon, we'll discuss 2 groups of heavenly worshipers who remind earthly worshipers that only ***the creator and sustainer*** of life ***is worthy to receive glory, honor, and power***. Let's begin in ***verse 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***. This group has baffled the minds of everyone over the years, and there's disagreement even among those within the same viewpoint category (Gregg, Rev 4:4-5). For example, some Historicists think they represent the triumphant church, while ***24*** makes others think of smaller Jewish councils (like a Sanhedrin of 23) or the vision where Ezekiel (8:16; 11:1) saw 24 orders of priests + the high priest (replaced by Jesus here). Some Preterists see ***the elders*** as representing the redeemed, while others think they simply complete the picture of heaven's court and represent no one. The opinions of Futurists include "*the 24 ancestors of Adam through Pharez*" (cf. Genesis 5-11), "*the 24 priestly orders from 1 Chronicles 24:4; 25:9-13*", "*angels*", and "*raptured New Testament saints*." Lastly, some Idealists/Spiritualists see them as celestial representatives of all believers whose ***robes*** could symbolize pure worship and whose ***crowns*** could imply victorious overcoming. Others in their camp acknowledge the link to the ***24*** priestly orders but think they represent the union of the 12 Old Testament tribes of Israel and the 12 New Testament Apostles, which finds some support in ***Revelation 21***, but you would think that John might have recognized himself sitting there (assuming his authorship)! The biggest disagreement is about whether the ***24 elders*** are human, angelic, or another type of created being. Some think they are human because: 1) The term "***elders***" is typically applied to mature human leaders, and angels don't age; 2) White robes and crowns are mostly associated with redeemed humans. However, some see them as angelic because:

1) They give interpretations like angels do, plus they're distinguished from and sing about redeemed humanity in the 3rd person (7:9-17; 14:1ff). 2) Angels are associated with thrones and rule in Colossians 1:16; 3) Angels wore white at Christ's tomb (cf. Matthew 28:3; John 20:12--gold crowns could refer to a royal function under God). 4) God is said to sit in a council of angels (not that He requires advice but that they get to participate in His ruling activities).

These wide-ranging opinions illustrate the struggle of western minds with non-specific writings (e.g., apocalyptic literature, poetry, narratives) that don't resolve neatly and aren't meant to be dissected line by line. One author suggested that "*Reading apocalyptic literature today is like watching 'Shrek' movies without knowing the nursery rhymes they were spoofing!*" John's 1st century audience was much more familiar with his Old Testament allusions and what they meant. I also think that he didn't identify the ***24 elders*** specifically because, in this scene, they function as "*throne enhancers*" like in a royal court (assembly). John sort of "*blurred them out*" like a photographer obscures the background to highlight the main object. His concern wasn't their identities but rather their activities, which he detailed in ***Revelation 5:8***. Look there a moment and notice how both groups of creatures "*fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints*." So, what are they doing? This royal assembly (court, council) is leading ***worship*** around/directing worship towards God's ***throne*** like a worship band of Old Testament temple priests known as Levites (cf. 1 Chronicles 16; Ezra 8:1-8)! That's John's point in mentioning these ***24 elders***--they remind earthly worshipers that only ***the creator and sustainer*** of life ***is worthy to receive glory, honor, and power***.

Now, let's read about the other strange worshipers in ***verses 6b-8***: ***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!"*** With a few minor exceptions, they bear remarkable likeness to the creatures described in the visions of Ezekiel (1:4-24) and Isaiah (6). It's been suggested that they could represent original creation (animals/people) and that the 24 elders could represent new creation (the redeemed). More to the point, perhaps, is how historical empires have used such images to symbolize their power and might. Today, for example, the U.S. presidential seal contains an eagle and the British fifty pence coin shows Brittania (the personification of Britain) sitting on a lion. This sort of propaganda is common to kingdoms past and present. Rome, for instance, used an image of

a golden eagle, while the emperor Domitian used images of an ox, a lion, and of himself. So, it's no coincidence that John saw these faces of earthly pomp and circumstance on angelic bodies worshiping around God's ***throne***! Furthermore, we can start seeing applications if we put ourselves in the shoes of 1st century believers who received this vision through John. What did we learn about them in chapters 2-3? Each was struggling to keep the faith in some way in cities filled with temples where they worshiped the emperor and the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome. One podcast episode I heard said that Rome had ***24*** state sanctioned religions (Christianity and Judaism were excluded), and that emperors would travel around with a royal assembly of priests ("*throne enhancers*") dressed in white robes and golden crowns who led people to sing and worship him (sort of like how the arrival of America's President is announced by a chorus of "*Hail to the Chief*"). Professor Craig Keener (pg. 176) tells us, for example, that "*The emperor Domitian expected worship as dominus et deus, 'lord and god', and all who resisted such worship would be suspect to many agents of imperial power in Asia*."

Now, with all this context, listen closely to John description of what he saw and heard from this strange heavenly assembly in ***verses 9-11***: ***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."*** Imagine the weary and persecuted 1st century believers hearing this hymn from heaven--a counter-cultural story which could be sung to bring perspective to their earthly difficulties. In their world filled with idolatry and symbols of human power to keep people in line, John comforted and encouraged the churches (then and now) by saying: "*I've seen heaven's throne, and the Roman Emperor isn't on it! In fact, Rome's animalistic symbols of power are currently bowing before the King of King and Lord of Lords!!*" Here, then, are some questions you'll want to ponder this week: 1) How might John's vision have put things in perspective for 1st century believers, and how might it do so today? 2) What else do we know about how heavenly beings interact with, instruct, and represent human beings? (this link may help) 3) In what ways should earthly worship leaders (and others) look to these heavenly worship leaders?

Let's pray: Father, our world, like theirs, is overrun by rulers and would be rulers who use these same, tired symbols of human pomp and circumstance to induce fear and keep people in line. Therefore, the value of apocalyptic literature for any audience (past, present, and future) is to provide a vision of heaven that reminds its faithful readers of the true King who always has, always does, and always will reign

over heaven and earth--that only ***the creator and sustainer*** of life ***is worthy to receive glory, honor, and power***. May such truths fill our hearts and minds as they form the content of our songs and other weekly worship activities in a world where lesser stories are being told. Amen.

Considerations for discussion leaders:
1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the "sweet spot", spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Preparing for and applying our sermon from Revelation 4:6b-11.

During this series it would help to repeatedly read over the chapter we're exploring. It would also be beneficial to utilize a commentary that explains the various interpretive strategies used throughout church history. If you need a suggestion, please ask! We should also be thinking about our "*next step*" in our relationship with Jesus. The Bible isn't meant simply to "*inform*" but to also "*transform*", and a next step always begins with faith in Christ--either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Our help comes through Christ's Spirit and His church body!

Other application questions (Don't forget the underlined questions in the sermon notes above!):

- When you turn on the television or go online, what messages, priorities and values are often being conveyed that conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ?
- What are some ways that people worship rulers or governments today, and what helpful perspectives can be gleaned from the vision of Revelation 4-5?
- In what ways does the worship of our church subvert the claims of the world and help us have a better perspective of troublesome world leaders and events? How has worship helped you in this way?
- How often have you taken the existence of angels seriously? How might western mindsets be affecting our ability to understand and receive biblical truth like we find in Revelation 4-5?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- An article on this section by Don Carson
- 5 Strategies for Reading Revelation from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- Heaven and Earth Theme from the Bible Project
- Other super helpful Revelation summaries from the Bible Project

Quotes related to this passage:

- **The 24 Elders in Heaven**: "We of course would like to identify these figures. It may be best to see the living creatures as heavenly beings, perhaps representing all of creation, and the 24 elders as the people of God, the number being taken either from the 24 priestly orders instituted by David (1 Chron 24:1–19) or, more likely, from the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles (see Rev 21:12, 14). The 24 elders wear white robes—symbolizing purity, victory, and worship—and golden crowns—symbolizing their share, by divine grace, in God's reign. More important than the identity and appearance of the creatures and elders, however, is their activity: ceaseless praise and worship, hymning the worthy-ness of God as the eternal one (4:8) and creator (4:11). The

worship of God is the heartbeat of the cosmos, even when we humans on earth do not see it, participate in it, or value it. Only God is worthy to receive what others, especially powerful political figures, may want or demand: our total devotion, our praise, our crowns. (Gorman, 107)

- **The 4 creatures**: "They praise God as the holy one; they praise him as the everlasting one. The four creatures deserve our attention for other reasons, too. They seem in some ways to resemble the seraphim who surround God in Isaiah's vision in the Temple (Isaiah chapter 6), and they are also quite like the four creatures of Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1). They represent the animal creation, including humans but at this stage with the human-faced creature being simply one among the others, alongside the king of the wild beasts (the lion), the massive leader of tamed animals (the ox), and the undisputed king of the birds (the eagle). (In some early Christian traditions, these animals represent the four gospel writers, so that Matthew (the human face), Mark (the lion), Luke (the ox) and John (the eagle) are thought of as the living creatures who surround, and worship, the Jesus of whom they speak.) These remarkable creatures seem to be not merely surrounding God's throne but ready to do his bidding. Twice John tells us that they are 'full of eyes': unsleeping, keeping watch for God over his whole creation." (Wright, 47-48)
- **Robes and crowns**: "White robes characterized priests and worshipers in a variety of Mediterranean religions. Further, some Jewish traditions envision special priestly access to the throne (3 Enoch 2:3–4) or a priestly model of worship in heaven (2 Enoch 22:3 A). Because crowns were appropriate to victors or 'overcomers' in athletic competitions, their crowns may signify that these are Christians who have persevered to the end, as each of the letters to the churches demands. But crowns were more often 'golden' when won in games sacred to a deity, and most often golden when worn by priests approaching a deity. But we should hardly take this to limit this number to the leaders of God's people. In Asiatic art a small number of priests have represented a much larger number of worshipers. Elders were leaders of the people and stood as their representatives before God's glory at Sinai (Ex. 24:9–10) as they would in the eschatological time (Isa. 24:23). Thus, these elders represent God's people as a whole, all of whom together are a 'kingdom and priests' (Rev. 1:6; 5:10)." (Keener, 172)
- **Facts about the 24 elders**: "The elders cannot be classified as actual redeemed saints, however, for they are clearly distinguished from the multitude of the saved in 7:9–17 (see on 7:13–14). And the fact that they present the prayers of the saints in 5:8 and sing of the redeemed in the third person also distinguishes them from believers. Remembering that in the letters the angels were identified as representatives of the seven churches and that in Daniel 10–12 angels represent nations, the elders here are to be identified as angelic beings representing the church as a whole, including the saints of the OT. If the four living creatures are heavenly representatives of all animate life throughout creation (as most interpreters think), then the elders are probably heavenly representatives of God's people. The four living beings represent general creation and the elders the elect of God's special creation. Also suggesting an angelic identification of the elders is the fact that the angel who reveals the visions of the book to John is referred to as 'a fellow-servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book,' all of whom are to worship together (22:9). Therefore, the reality being conveyed is that the church is represented in heaven by powerful heavenly beings who attend the throne of God, and who therefore hold great power (they have their own thrones and wear golden crowns), which they exercise on our behalf. The elders are angels who operate in a priestly capacity by presenting the prayers of the saints to God (cf. 5:8 and 8:3) and by interpreting heavenly visions to people (cf. 5:5; 7:13 and 10:4, 8; 19:9; 22:8). This further reflects their Levitical priestly identification noted above, especially since the throne room vision of chs. 4–5 is also to be understood as occurring

in the heavenly temple (note that the visions of Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6, both alluded to throughout chs. 4-5, are set within the context of a heavenly temple)." (Beale, 102)

- **One group of 24, not 2 groups of 12**: "One should note that there is one group of twenty-four elders, not two groups of twelve—e.g., the twelve patriarchs and the twelve disciples. Twenty-four is the number of priestly families appointed to serve in the Temple (1 Chr 24:1–19), a practice that persisted in Judaism until the Temple was destroyed in AD 70 (cf. 4QMishmarot[4Q320–330]; 4QOtot[4Q329]; 1 Macc 2:1; Luke 1:8–9). The priestly character of the number brings to the reader's mind the identification of the church as priests in 1:6. That the twenty-four are 'clothed in white robes' recalls the similar promise to the conqueror in 3:5 (cf. 3:4, 18). That they are wearing 'crowns' calls to mind the identification of the church as a kingdom in 1:6, as well as the promise of a crown (though not specifically a golden one) to the conqueror (2:10; 3:11). 'Golden' crowns will later be associated with marauding locusts (9:7) and with 'one like a son of man' (14:14). Given that John's description of the twenty-four elders draws so much upon his earlier characterizations of Christians, does it follow then that the twenty-four elders are Christians? The answer is No, and the clearest indication of this is 7:13–14, where one of the elders explains to John the identity of the Great Multitude as the Church, thereby indicating that the elder himself does not belong to that group. Rather, the twenty-four elders are angels. John is picking up the terminology of Isaiah 24:23, where God's heavenly court is characterized as 'elders': 'on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before his elders he will manifest his glory.' Throughout the book John will draw an extensive picture of the heavenly Temple. The twenty-four elders represent the twenty-four angelic priestly families that serve in the heavenly Temple. That they wear crowns is not inconsistent with their role as priests. Indeed, God commanded Zechariah to take 'silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest' (Zech 6:11). The similarities between the descriptions of the twenty-four elders and Christians in Revelation is due to the fact that Christians are portrayed precisely in priestly and royal terms. The twenty-four elders form a heavenly counterpart, as it were, to the church on earth." (Trafton, 59-60)
- **Variations in the visions**: "Around the throne and on each side (lit., 'in the midst') of it are four living creatures (4:6). In appearance they have several features in common: each is full of eyes in front and in back (4:7, 8), each has a face (though their faces differ from one another: 4:7), and each has six wings (4:8). The description of the four living creatures is based primarily upon the four living creatures in Ezek 1:5–11, which are identified in Ezek 10:3–14 as cherubim. The four faces are the same, but in Revelation each creature has a different face, while in Ezekiel each has all four faces, one on each side of the head (Ezek 1:10; 10:14). Also, the order of the faces is different. In Revelation the order is lion, ox, man, eagle; in Ezekiel it is man, lion, ox, eagle (Ezek 1:10) and cherub, man, lion, eagle (Ezek 10:14). In addition, the creatures in Ezekiel have four, not six, wings (Ezek 1:6, 11). Ezekiel says nothing about the creatures being full of eyes, though he does speak of a wheel associated with each of them (Ezek 1:15–21; 10:9–13) and observes that the wheels were full of eyes all around (Ezek 1:18; 10:12). Ezekiel also describes other characteristics of the living creatures John omits (e.g., their feet). In Isa 6 Isaiah sees the Lord sitting upon a throne attended by the seraphim who have six wings (Isa 6:2). No mention is made, however, of the seraphim's faces, of their being full of eyes, or of their being four in number. Neither the specific details nor the differences between Revelation and Ezekiel/Isaiah should be pressed. John has combined the visions of the two prophets into a single vision in his own unique way so as to depict the heavenly court and to align himself with those two great prophets: what they saw, he saw." (Trafton, 61)

- **Four representative creatures**: "Here all attempts to draw these images literally, rather than allowing them to spark the imagination, come crashing down, since they are thoroughly—and intentionally—an odd mixture of being. In turn they are, first and second, like a lion and like an ox, both land animals that walk on all fours. The third creature, however, is said simply to have a face like a human being, so that with this description one is no longer sure what kind of imagery should appear on his or her visual landscape. This becomes even more so with the final one, which is not a land animal at all, but rather was like a flying eagle. Perhaps rather than try to visualize these creatures, one should rather recognize that they cover a lot of ground, as it were, in terms of created beings: a wild animal, followed by a tamed animal, both of whom are four-legged, and then only the face of a two-legged animal, and finally a land animal that is best known for its living in the sky. What seems to be going on, therefore, is that with these broad strokes the four 'living creatures' cover most of the more commonly known kinds of earthly creatures, who are now envisioned in heaven and as having basically human features. More importantly they are now seen as having six wings, and as being covered with eyes all around, even under their wings. With that they cease altogether to be any recognizable land animal. Indeed, it is not easy to determine what John understood by this unique feature in his vision of heaven. Most likely the collage was intentional so that the whole of creation—all living beings, as it were—is seen in heaven as joining in the worship of 'him who sits on the throne.'" (Fee, 72-73)
- **The Lord who rides upon cherubim**: "The cherubim probably functioned as a throne pedestal from the start (cf. 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron. 13:6; Ps. 80:1; 99:1). Like the portraits of most of his contemporaries, John's probably come directly from Ezekiel; the lion, bull (here a calf), eagle, and human faces were also on Ezekiel's creatures (except that in Ezekiel each creature had all four faces). Ezekiel's vision probably employed the most powerful and regal of animals to communicate the majesty of the creatures that carry God's throne. That the creatures were 'covered with eyes' (Rev 4:6; cf. Ezek 1:18; 10:12; 3 Enoch 22:8) suggests that nothing on earth is hidden from them (Zech. 4:10), with the implication, 'How much less from God himself?' That they never rest from worship (Rev. 4:8) suggests both divine empowerment for worship and the worthiness of God (cf. 7:15)." (Keener, 174-175)
- **Animals as symbols of power**: "John describes four living creatures: 'The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle' (v 7). They are drawn from Ezekiel's vision of God's throne (Ezekiel 1) together with the six-winged seraphs and their song in Isaiah 6:2–3. They represent the praise of all animate creation. But the visions of both Ezekiel and John draw on imagery from their cultures. Empires throughout history have used powerful beasts to represent their power. The British Museum is full of statues, reliefs and coins of mighty animals or composite figures—such as lions with human faces and wings—from the Babylonian and other ancient empires. This was part of their propaganda and symbolism—a declaration of their power. You were to look on these beasts and know that the empire was invincible. Rome was no different. Everywhere John's readers looked they would see the Roman eagle and other beasts. Take a British ten-pence coin and what do you see? A lion. And on most fifty pence coins you see Britannia sitting on that lion. Look at the US presidential seal and you see an eagle. The British lion, the American eagle and the Chinese dragon still proclaim imperial power. A strong stock market is called a bull market, and a creature with the face like a man reminds us of the humanist worldview of the Enlightenment. It's not that John was predicting the British empire or the idolatry of the market in capitalist systems. Rather, idolatrous powers use symbols and imagery to proclaim their power. John invites us to take these symbols and subvert them." (Chester, 52-54)

- **The need for this vision in John's day**: "The seven churches that John addresses in Revelation 2–3 are either struggling or compromised or both. Those churches need a vision of God's reign if they're to endure their suffering or end their compromise. Chapter 4 is full of political imagery—thrones, crowns, imperial animals (remember that, as far as the empire is concerned, John is a political prisoner). But it's all subservient to God. The twenty-four elders get down from their thrones and take off their crowns to bow before the throne of God…The churches to which John wrote saw Roman imperial rule with all its splendour and imagery. It was constantly in their sight line. They were tempted to compromise or give up. God appears to be absent from history, and others appear to be lords. But John sees God on the throne and his reign puts all other rulers completely in their place. Twice God is described as 'him who lives for ever and ever' (Revelation 4:9–10). This is John's response to the claims of 'eternal Rome'. Rome appeared to rule all the known world, but God rules in heaven. The words 'Worthy are you' greeted the Roman emperor in triumphal procession. During the reign of Emperor Domitian the words 'our Lord and God' were introduced into the imperial cult. The empire cried 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God' in acclamation of the emperor. Imagine then how the Christians felt as they heard the song of heaven: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power' (v 11). The worship of heaven in Revelation 4 is John's answer to the imperial cult. The chapter is structured to direct our attention to the One at the centre: God. He is at the centre of heavenly worship, and he is at the centre of human history." (Chester, 55-56)
- **Blurring the background**: "One seeking to digest or communicate this chapter should not bog down in the details of most of its background, important as they are for understanding the details of John's portrait. One should instead place all the details (expounded in the context of their primary Old Testament background) in the broader perspective of their function—to reveal the greatness of God's court, hence, his own greatness. Thus, they also reveal a striking contrast with the pretense of the earthly ruler's arrogant pomp. The text invites us to worship, today no less than at its first reading in Ephesus. It also invites us to relinquish our fear of human grandeur, which pales before the majesty of the eternal God with whom we have become intimate." (Keener, 176-177)
- **Standing up to contemporary idols**: "John's vision encourages Christians in Roman Asia that the worship in the imperial cult is merely a farce, a pale imitation of the true worship in the heavenly court. And as late first-century Christians gained courage to declare that the emperor had no clothes, we must declare the same for the idols of our generation. Caesar did not create (4:11) and is not eternal (4:8), nor did he redeem us by his blood (5:9); he had no control over ultimate hope." (Keener, 181-182)
- **Symbolic, yet real**: "John witnesses a scene of worship involving the elders and the living creatures. Although his depiction is symbolic rather than literal, it is nonetheless real, in that real beings are portrayed with real functions. As subsequent chapters reveal, in addition to their role in heavenly worship, the elders present our prayers and interpret heavenly visions to believers, while the living creatures administer judgment throughout the earth. How often have we taken seriously the existence of these beings? Have we relegated them to the realm of biblical allegory? What have we lost because of that? How does a western worldview affect our ability to understand and receive biblical truth of this nature?" (Beale, 108)

Quotes related to the larger context:

- **Biblical Apocalypses**: "So, in terms of the two books that are given the label apocalyptic, there's one in the Hebrew Bible, one in the New Testament: Daniel and Revelation. With Daniel, it's a

bit of a misnomer because half of the book is these dreams and visions. But the first half of the book are the narratives about Daniel and his friends. Those two halves go together in a crucially important way, but the whole book isn't an apocalypse like The Revelation is. It's also true that there are sections of other books that are apocalypses. Like Zechariah, first half of the book is about his dreams and visions in the heavenly temple. Sections of the book of Ezekiel, the beginning, middle, and end. The prophet Isaiah has an apocalypse in one chapter, chapter 6. The Prophet Amos has a series of apocalypses: chapter 7 through 9. And then we talked about Abraham has dreams, visions and so is Jacob. There you go. In a way, what we're focusing in on is when you have a whole book or a section of a book that is full of this kind of dream imagery." (Tim Macke Video Transcript)

- **Apocalyptic Literature**: "John's throne vision in Revelation 4, like most of this book, resembles visions in the biblical prophets (esp. Isa. 6:1–5; Ezek. 1:4–28; Dan. 7:9–14). Yet while Revelation is biblical, it is also relevant to the issues and language of its day: John frequently emphasizes the themes most dominant in the literature of his contemporaries, which we call apocalyptic literature. From an early period, Jewish apocalyptic texts focused on and developed particularly the throne visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah. John's language regularly echoes Scripture, but he shares this feature with some of his contemporaries: 'And I looked and behold' (lit. trans. of 4:1) is standard language from Ezekiel (e.g., Ezek. 1:4, 15; 2:9; 8:2, 7, 10; 44:4) and Daniel (Dan. 8:3, 15; 10:5; 12:5), which also becomes characteristic of apocalyptic visions (e.g., 1 Enoch 14:14–15, 18; 85:3). The similarity of subject matter between Revelation and other apocalyptic visions makes some of the differences in detail all the more striking. Apocalyptic texts frequently narrate the visionary's arduous journey through various heavenly gates to reach God's throne (e.g., 1 Enoch 14:9–13); some suggest dangers involved in this journey. By contrast, yet like his biblical predecessors, John is simply transported there by God's sovereign summons (Rev. 4:1) and the Spirit's inspiration (4:2; cf. 17:3; 21:10). Some texts provide angelic help for the ascent (e.g., 1 Enoch 71:5; 87:3; 2 Enoch 7:1; 2 Bar. 6:3–4), but John ascends simply by the Spirit, as did Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 5, 24; 37:1; 43:5)… John does not have to force his way into heaven, as some of his contemporaries thought they did; he is invited, in language that recalls God's call to Moses to receive his revelation: 'Come up here' (Rev. 4:1; cf. Ex. 19:20, 24; 24:12; 34:2) recalls the Bible's first throne vision (Ex. 24:10–12; cf. also 19:24)." (Keener, 169-170)
- **Engaging our imaginations**: "Perhaps above everything else, one must be warned not to stoop to unthoughtful literalism while reading chapters 4 and 5. Rather, children of the Enlightenment though we are, we must do our best to let the visions speak to our imaginations—to take our breath away, as it were, and thus to give one theological perspective from which to see what comes next in chapter 6, not to mention our own present existence." (Fee, 66)
- **Echoes of Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7**: "These visions both came in Babylon just as John's vision came in the symbolic "Babylon" of the Roman Empire. Ezekiel sees God on a moving throne with all-seeing eyes. Even in Babylon, in the stronghold of empire, God is reigning. Daniel also has a vision of empires: four successive empires which are superseded by another empire whose dominion will never end (Daniel 7). The Ancient of Days gives all authority to the people of God represented by the son of man. The churches to which John wrote saw Roman imperial rule with all its splendour and imagery. It was constantly in their sight line. They were tempted to compromise or give up. God appears to be absent from history, and others appear to be lords. But John sees God on the throne and his reign puts all other rulers completely in their place. Twice God is described as 'him who lives for ever and ever' (Revelation 4:9–10). This is John's response

to the claims of 'eternal Rome'. Rome appeared to rule all the known world, but God rules in heaven." (Chester, 55)

- **Connections with Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7**: "The vision John has is so closely related to that of Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days and Son of man (Dan. 7:9–14) that we must conclude he saw much the same thing, was aware of it, and recorded it deliberately with that similarity in mind… There are also significant similarities to things Ezekiel saw in his initial vision: four living creatures (Ezek. 1:5; Rev. 4:6), a sea of crystal (Ezek. 1:22; Rev. 4:6), and a throne surrounded by fire on which God is seated (Ezek. 1:26–28; Rev. 4:1–5). Some believe that Ezekiel 1 is the main model for Revelation 4–5. But on the whole these chapters should be interpreted primarily within the conceptual framework of Daniel 7, since the allusions to Ezekiel 1 become less dominant in the ch. 5 vision, but Daniel 7 continues to be present. This has significant interpretative implications, as we shall see." (Beale, 97)
- **How chapter 3 flows into 4**: "The picture of Christ in 3:21 presently sitting on His Father's throne leads into the vision of chs. 4–5. In these chapters John wants to explain in more detail and with more imagery the past act of Christ's exaltation upon His throne as ruler over the church and the cosmos, which was accomplished by His death and resurrection. John is taken up to the throne room of God, where he sees Christ enthroned along with the Father. The vision shows how Christ's exhortation to each of the churches to overcome is based on the fact that Christ Himself has already overcome (5:5)…*I will show you what must come to pass* after these things is apparently used in the same way as in 1:1 and 1:19. We have already seen that the after these things allusion from Daniel in 1:19 and its equivalent 'shortly/quickly' in 1:1 indicated that the fulfillment of the Daniel 2 prophecy concerning the establishment of God's kingdom has begun in Christ and the church. Rev. 4:1 introduces not only 4:1–5:14, but also the rest of the visions in the book (4:2–22:5). It becomes clear, therefore, that all the visions about to unfold concern events throughout the church age, past, present, and future. Some may have already unfolded, others await their fulfillment, and yet others have multiple fulfillments throughout the church age. In this connection, the NT is both consistent and clear in its view that the 'last days' or 'latter days' started already with the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:17–21, citing Joel 2:28–32 as fulfilled; 1 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 1:20; Heb. 1:2; Jas. 5:3; 1 John 2:18; Jude 18, etc.)…All the visions from Rev. 6:1 to 22:5 flow out of the vision in chs. 4 and 5. They are all visions which come from the sealed book of 5:1ff. This means that all these visions probably have a mixture of past, present, and future elements." (Beale, 96, 99-100)
- **How the chapters fit together**: "It may help us to keep our balance in the rich mixture of imagery in the following chapters if we see the book like this, structured around its sequences of 'sevens'. We have already had the seven letters to the churches. Now we are to be introduced to the seven seals, which are opened between 6:1 and 8:1. The seventh introduces a further sequence, the seven trumpets, which are blown one by one from 8:6 to 11:15. Then, at the centre of the book, we find visions which unveil the ultimate source of evil and its chief agents: the Dragon, the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land—and also a vision of those who have somehow defeated these monsters (chapters 12–15). This then leads into the final sequence of seven: the seven bowls of God's wrath, the final plagues which, like the plagues of Egypt (15:1), will be the means of judging the great tyrannical power and rescuing God's people from its claws. These bowls of wrath are poured out in chapter 16, but their effect is described more fully in chapters 17 and 18, leading to the celebration of victory over the two Beasts in chapter 19. That only leaves the old Dragon himself, and the last twists of his fate are described in chapter 20. This then clears the

stage for the final unveiling of God's eventual plan: the New Jerusalem in which heaven and earth are joined fully and forever." (Wright, 43-44)

- **Behind the scenes**: "Now, by strong implication, we are being invited to see that the powers of the world are simply parodies, cheap imitation copies, of the one Power who really and truly rules in heaven and on earth. As John's great vision unfolds, we will see how it is that these human kingdoms have acquired their wicked, cruel power, and how it is that God's radically different sort of power will win the victory over them. This is the victory in which the seven letters were urging the churches to claim their share. We now discover how that victory comes about. It begins with the unveiling of reality. Behind the complex and messy confusions of church life in ancient Turkey; behind the challenges of the fake synagogues and the threatening rulers; behind the ambiguous struggles and difficulties of ordinary Christians—there stands the heavenly throne room in which the world's creator and lord remains sovereign. Only by stopping in our tracks and contemplating this vision can we begin to glimpse the reality which not only makes sense of our own realities but enables us, too, to win the victory." (Wright, 45-46)

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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