

In the Spirit Revelation 4

This video, using her own words, gives you a little glimpse into the life of a missionary by the name of Lottie Moon, who served in China in the late 1800s. Every year during the Christmas season, the International Mission Board (IMB) does a fund raising push in her honor, in order to send more missionaries around the world to reach the unreached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The IMB is an organization that my family has personally supported, and that One Church has supported over several years now. And as we have in the past, we want to extend opportunity to you, if you feel led, to make a Kingdom investment this Christmas season to support sending out more followers of Jesus who will share His message with those who have never heard. If God lays that on your heart, please just put the note “IMB” on your check or in the memo section of the giving portal on our website, and as we also did last year, my family is going to match whatever you give to the IMB- so take this opportunity to double your investment in God’s work around the world.

I also want to thank Vern for sharing his testimony with us last week, I hope his story was encouraging to you. One of my favorite verses in the book of Revelation is **Revelation 12:11** that, referring to believers defeating Satan, it says *“and they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony...”* There’s power in sharing with others about the work of God in your life. That verbal sharing with others has power to defeat the enemy of mankind.

This morning we’re going to continue our study in the book of Revelation, in chapter 4. Now, it might seem a little strange at first, now that we’re in the month of December, singing Christmas songs and having the building decorated all “Christmasy”... it might feel a little odd to be reading though the book of Revelation. That seems like 2 extremely opposite type themes, right- maybe that presents a little rub? Here’s the thing- we can’t embrace the celebratory vibes of Christmas, without also embracing the celebratory vibes of Christ’s return. There can’t be true lasting Christmas “peace on Earth” until God completes the story with the events of the book of Revelation. Somehow, when we think about Christmas, we have to make sure we include the whole Old and New Testament

narrative in our understanding of the Christmas story. Jesus' birth as a human in this world, is sort of the halfway point in the whole story of God's pursuit and redemption of mankind. And if you're able to join us for our short Christmas Eve service, that over-arching zoomed out perspective of Christmas will be emphasized there.

Now, I definitely don't want to encourage us to *underemphasize* how amazing of a thing it is to celebrate specifically God clothing Himself in human flesh, and humbling Himself to be born into this world, out of His desire to offer a fix for mankind's broken relationship with Him- but somehow we have to also keep in mind the fact that His first coming paved the way for His second coming. He came once, *so that* when He comes again in the end, we will all truly be ready for Him.

I'm particularly excited this morning to be looking at Revelation chapter 4 together during this Christmas season, because in this chapter we are given a small glimpse into God's home- His throne room in Heaven. During this season of celebrating Jesus humbly entering our world, how fitting is it for us to consider at the same time what *His* world looks like, and imagine what it will be like for us to enter into *His* realm? The whole point of Christmas is that God entered into our messed up world, so that we could then enter into His perfect world. Let's look at this passage together, I'll read the first **4 verses of chapter 4...**

In this chapter, we have a bit of a transition into a new section. Back in **chapter 1 verse 19**, Jesus gives the 3 part outline for this book of Revelation, He tells John to write: 1.) the things which John *has seen*, 2.) the things *which are*, and 3.) the things which will take place *after these things*. Well, *part 1* was completed in chapter 1, as John describes this figure of Jesus that he *has seen*. Then the messages to the churches in chapters 2 and 3 is *part 2*- the things which *are*- in other words those chapters describe the then present day church situations as things were in the present time that John was writing this letter. And now in chapter 4, we are told that we are transitioning into *part 3*- the description of the things that will take place *after*- things that for John will take place in the future, things that you and I should also be expecting to take place in the future, since history has yet to see the fulfillment of what the rest of the book of Revelation describes. Now, we don't really get into the fullness of that description of these future things until chapter 5, more so chapter 6 and onward, because

John first shares with us the scene that he sees in Heaven, before he writes of the things that will come after.

So, the scene is this: a door opens in Heaven, and John again hears the trumpet voice that He first heard in chapter 1. Chapter 1 tells us that when John turned around to see who the trumpet voice was, we have described that He sees Jesus. So, in my humble opinion, the publishers of the Bibles we hold in our hands should have very much put the words of chapter 4 verse 1 that are within the quotations, these words should be in red, attributing them to Jesus. It's a little odd that they chose to put chapter 1 verse 8 in red, but *not* chapter 1 verse 11, nor chapter 4 verse 1 in red. If you ever met a Bible publisher, you can tell them it seems they messed it up here. And while you're at it, tell them they messed up the maps section in the back as well, with the map of Moses and the Israelite's exodus from Egypt. You know what I'm talking about? I have yet to see a map in the back of the Bible that shows the path of the exodus crossing over any body of water. That's like the climax of the whole journey- something's not adding up here guys, fix it... I mean, are they even reading what they are printing?

And so Jesus says "*Come up here,*" so that John can write down the things that are to take place in the future, and it says immediately that he was "*in the Spirit.*" Now, what this most likely means is that John is having a very realistic *vision*, he's probably in some sort of dream-like state of reality, he feels he has left his body at the island of Patmos, and is now in a totally different heavenly dimension. He senses he has entered into the spiritual realm that would be impossible for a physical earthly body to enter. And what he sees is a heavenly throne, with God Himself on the throne. John describes God as having an appearance like a jasper and a sardius stone. I had to look up both of these stones so that I could imagine the right imagery- if you look to the projectors you'll see a picture of a polished *jasper* stone; and then here's also a picture of a polished *sardius* stone. Both are incredibly beautiful and rich with color. We don't know exactly what John meant by this, but whatever the image of God that John was able to see sitting on the throne, something about God made John think of these two colorful stones. Around God's throne there is a rainbow, yet somehow *emerald* in appearance. Here's a picture of emerald- we don't know if it was a traditional multicolored rainbow that shimmered slightly emerald green, or maybe John was referring more to a emerald-like *texture* of a multicolored rainbow, or if the the rainbow was 7 different shades of emerald green, or just the shape was

rainbow-like while shining emerald green, or perhaps it resembled more of this 2nd picture I have for you of an emerald that has rainbow colors in it- maybe that picture and understanding makes the most sense. Whatever John is seeing, it seems to be something so other-worldly and beautiful that he's having a hard time describing to us what it looks like.

Ok, so then also around the throne where the emerald rainbow encircled jasper-sardius God-being sits, is 24 other thrones, upon which, what John calls "elders," are sitting. All throughout the New Testament, the word *elder* is used many times, in the context of one who is older in age (and assumed wiser), who (in the Gospel books) was part of the leadership for the Jewish religious groups, OR who (in the context of the rest of the New Testament) were *church* leaders (pastors, overseers, spiritual leaders). There are various ideas as to who these elders specifically are, or as to who they represent- maybe there are 2 sets of 12, representing the Old and the New Testament, like 12 tribes of Israel/12 disciples of Jesus- perhaps. Jesus did say to his disciples in **Matthew 19:28** "*Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*" That would account for 12 of the 24 thrones, but I would probably lean more towards these 24 elders being more symbolic of a position that will be shared by more than just 24 specific individuals from all time. After all, Jesus says this awaits "*you who have followed,*" that could be taken very generally and not just referring specifically to a select 12 who have followed Him; besides, it wouldn't make much sense to include Judas Iscariot (one of the 12) who ended up betraying Jesus. In contrast, I would suggest that at the very least these elders seem to represent a united church of those who overcome and reign with the Jesus-God in His kingdom. They *seem* to be human in form in contrast to the beings described that we'll see in a few more verses, so it doesn't seem they are angelic-type beings that were created by God to be overseers in the Heavenly realm, but rather more representative of some portion of the human race. White garments is a theme we see a few other places in this book as descriptive of the clothing of the people who overcome through the tribulation and of those who are with Christ- and a crown of victory is mentioned in other places as well, although these crowns are described as golden- signifying more than just winning the race and being crowned a victor- a golden crown would be more representative of kingly rule, which the Bible does tell us that followers of Jesus will *rule* with Christ.

I'm confident on many things, and will voice a very strong opinion on other things we see in Revelation that have very significant backing from other verses, but this is not a place that we have much explanation from other passages, so I feel ok leaving this as: it *seems* this is representative of humans surrounding God's throne that are given authority by God- and there will be a little more evidence for that conclusion that I'll mention in the verses that follow, but I'm also ok with knowing that we'll understand this more clearly later on in the day we get to see it for ourselves personally. **Verse 5...**

So there's lightning and thunder flashing and sounding from the origin of God's throne, and seven lamps of fire, which are God's seven spirits. We talked about the 7 lamps of fire which are the 7 Spirits of God back in chapter 1, and the connection to Isaiah 11:2 that describes 7 different spirits of God. This dwelling place contrasts pretty extremely with Jesus' environment described in His first coming- wrapped not in emerald rainbows and lightning surrounded by 24 kings, but rather wrapped in earthly rags and nestled in an animal feeding trough surrounded by poor shepherds. And then verse 6 and following describe 4 other heavenly beings surrounding God's throne... **(verses 6-8)**

Now, these- unlike the elders, are obviously not human. These beings have eyes everywhere, they have different faces- one like a human, one like a lion, one like a calf (a baby cow/baby bull), one like an eagle. And they each have 6 wings. It's worth noting here that Ezekiel chapter 1 also has a similar description of God's throne as we have read here in Revelation 4, and it also includes a similar, yet slightly different and more detailed description of these 4 creatures. And what's interesting is that the book of Ezekiel goes on to describe the coming judgement of God, the ending of a current world season, punishment for Jerusalem who has abandoned God as an idolatrous prostitute, judgment on the other political nations of the world, a call to be a witness for the Lord, a restoration of Israel, dead being brought back to life, a new King David-like Kingdom being installed, enemies rising against that Kingdom, the enemies being defeated, and a new dwelling place built for God and His people to live in, along with a river of healing waters flowing from it and fruit trees of healing lining it's shores. It's totally the basic roadmap for the book of Revelation. The book of Ezekiel is the prototype- it's the foreshadowing of what will happen on a greater scale with more finality in the book of Revelation. Let me know if you choose to take a peak at Ezekiel in your personal study time, and I'll send you what I just

outlined to you as the major themes that directly, in exact order, correspond with Revelation.

So these 4 living creatures, they say over and over:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.” Can you imagine this scene, with God dazzling in jewel colors, 24 kings, crystal clear glass floor, seven lamps of fire, emerald rainbow, lightning and thunder, and 4 wild looking creatures in the middle of it all chanting in unison *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.”* **CRACKLING LIGHTNING... THUNDER...** *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.”* I love this statement of God who was, who is, and who is to come. I love knowing that God has been in the past- He has been working in the past and He has been sovereign in the past; **AND** God is here in the present- He’s currently working in the present and He is currently sovereign in the present; **AND** God will continue to be in the future- He will continue His work in the future and He will continue to be sovereign in the future. Again, this scene is so *strikingly* different than the scene of the baby wrapped in cloth in the manger surrounded by Mary, Joseph, donkeys, and shepherds- right? Is anyone making *this* Revelation 4 nativity set? I want this one to be set it up in my home! And that’s not all that’s taking place, let’s read **verse 9 to the end...**

So the 4, wild looking, living creatures day and night repetitively chant *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come,”* but note here that there is a significant change in the verb tense of what is described. I checked the Greek to make sure, and what I verified is that **verse 8** is *present* tense, *“day and night they do not cease to say”* -it doesn’t say *future* tense *“day and night they will not cease to say,”* but rather it’s very much present tense, actually present *participle* tense, which conveys current and ongoing continuous action- in other words it’s happening and continuing to happen in Heaven right now as John is writing. But then in **verse 9** the Greek says when the living creatures *will* (future tense) do this- it’s not conveyed very clearly here in the NASB version, but the original Greek word “give” is a future tense “will give,” and then **verse 10** continues with future tense verbs- the 24 elders *will* (future tense) fall down, and they *will* (future tense) worship, and they *will* (future tense) cast their crowns before the throne saying...

I want to be careful not to make too much out of this, but to me it feels a little odd to shift tenses here. What I would have expected would be John telling us that presently the 4 living creatures do not cease to say: Holy Holy Holy, and every time they do this the elders fall down, worship, and cast their crowns saying Worthy are You, our Lord... but that's *not* what's there, that's *not* what John writes. He writes it as "*presently* the 4 living creatures *continually* do not cease to say: Holy Holy Holy; and then in *the future* they will still be saying Holy Holy Holy, and in that future the elders will then fall down, worship, and cast their crowns saying Worthy are You, our Lord..."

I think the significance of this subtle nuance could be that yes the 4 living creatures are already presently there day and night chanting praise before God's throne- but the 24 elders, who I already mentioned as seeming to be humans, perhaps representing Old and New Testament believers, past/present/future- they are not *yet* in God's throne room. I think they are part of the "after these things" future events. I think they are the only "after these things" referred to in chapter 4- like I said, the bulk of the "after things" are described in chapters 5/6 and onward. I mentioned Ezekiel chapter 1 earlier, and with it's detailed description of the beings in God's throne room, the 24 elders are notably not mentioned there. As we'll see, Heaven is not opened until after the events of the Great Tribulation, which have yet to be described. So I think there is intentional significance in the tense changing here, it seems to be implied that the humans who are seen surrounding God's throne are *not* there currently, but they will be there later in the future.

If you have your study guide with you, I want to point out that the 4 living creatures and the 24 elders are mentioned again in chapter 19- the chapter that proclaims the return of Jesus, the judgement of God, and the marriage of Jesus the Lamb to the church bride. It's in this chapter 19 that overcoming believers are given clean, bright, white, fine linen to wear- and it's mentioned that the 24 elders and the 4 living creatures fell down and worshiped God saying "Amen. Hallelujah!" (**Rev 19:4**) What chapter 4 declares will happen in the future concerning the creatures and the elders, here is fulfilled in chapter 19. The Greek verb tense for "fell" here in chapter 19 verse 4 is what is called *aorist* tense, and it's usually translated into English as a past tense verb. But the Greek significance of the aorist tense is that it conveys an action that is completed. In

other words, what was foretold in chapter 4, is fulfilled/completed here in chapter 19.

And here in chapter 19, there is described the voice of a great multitude being heard there in the throne room scene- praising God with the words: *“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.”* **(Rev.19:6)** This too seems to convey the idea that the 24 elders perhaps represent the multitude of believers from all time, but even if they are something different, the fact of the matter is that those who make Jesus their King here in this world, will get to join Jesus in His Kingdom throne room in the world that is to come. And I don't want anyone to miss out on that, especially during this Christmas season. May we not just embrace the 1st coming nostalgia of the baby in the manger, but may we embrace the fiercely powerful and awesome returning King who wants to share with us His glory.

I'd like to end today's service in a way that is quite different than how we would typically end. Have you ever been to a “pep rally” or a youth camp, or maybe a football game where one section of the crowd does a certain cheer or chant, and then a different section of the crowd answers with a different cheer or chant, you know what I'm talking about? There's like a competition for who can say it louder with more spirit, passion, power, clarity? Some of y'll are getting nervous... Here's what I want to do, we're going to get into the “spirit” of this throne room experience by having this side chant what the 4 living creatures say, and this side is going to answer with what the 24 elders say. And we'll do it a few times, I'll try to help keep everyone on track, but I want you to attempt to loudly call out these praises to our Almighty God, and offer our voices to him as a gift of worship, before I close us out in prayer. You think we can do it justice? Let's try it, team one, you guys are the Holy Holy Holy part...

“Holy, holy, holy *is* the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.”

“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.”