

Series Revelation

This Message #10 Revelation 4:1-11

We have completed our study of the first section of the book of Revelation. We have learned that Jesus was greatly concerned about seven specific 1st Century fellowships in Asia Minor. He wanted them to be pure and strong in their faith commitments and to be able to make an impact in their communities for the sake of the Kingdom of God. He called their attention to their spiritual weaknesses, and then outlined the steps which were necessary for them to correct their problems. In addition, He offered incentives in the form of promises in order to get them to obey.

We learned that the spiritual health of believers is determined by their degree of faithfulness to Jesus. Jesus made it clear in His teaching that obedience to His commands would subject His followers to difficulties, but that He expected them to be faithful to Him no matter how much persecution, destitution, and suffering they had to endure. “Be faithful unto death” was His radical expectation.

In the introduction to the letter, John announced that there would be a blessing to everyone who would “read the words of this prophecy,” and, even more importantly, he wrote, “Blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it” (*Revelation 1:3*). Faithfulness to Jesus would require obedience.

In His assessment of the spiritual conditions of the churches, Jesus made it clear that His blessings would apply to disobedient members only if they repented and began to do His will. This is a plea that Jesus continues to make to nominal and compromising believers today. Unfortunately, the statement by John, “Blessed is the one ... who hears this prophecy and takes to heart what is written in it,” (*Revelation 1:3*) is mostly ignored by those who most critically need to pay attention to the words of Jesus. Jesus says to these people, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (*Revelation 3:20*). It seems to me that too many church fellowships and their members are unwilling to throw open the door to their lives and give an enthusiastic welcome for Jesus to come in.

The conditions which were described in chapters 2 and 3 are representative of conditions which have existed in church fellowships through all the years between the birth of the Church at Pentecost and the return of Jesus at the end of the age. We will find, as we proceed through this book, that there are several other sections which also describe conditions between the day of Pentecost and the Second Coming of Jesus.

This span of time is referred to as the Church Age. It is my opinion that each section of this book looks at the Church Age from a different perspective. For example, one section will describe events from the perspective of people on earth. Another section will describe the same events from the perspective of heaven.

Let's keep in mind the overall theme of this book: **"The Victory of Jesus and His Church Over Satan and the World."** We have completed the first section, the first "scan" or "sweep," of the book. Chapters 2 and 3 were a description of the "internal conditions" of the churches. Each of the following sections will describe other ways in which Jesus will be victorious over the forces of evil. Each section has words of comfort and hope for believers, no matter when or where they live.

The next major section is chapters 4 through 7. Our focus will be on the "external conditions" which affect the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church has endured persecution throughout its history.

Please study the pictorial outline of the Book of Revelation inside the back cover of this book.

Take special notice of the vertical line on the right side of the diagram. This line represents the end of the age. It represents the point in time when all of the persecutions of the Church come to an end, when Satan and His helpers are defeated, when the world system comes to an end, and when Jesus appears to begin His reign as King on earth. This line represents the climax of the book of Revelation.

You will notice that 6 of the 7 sections of the book of Revelation (the horizontal lines) come to their conclusion at the same climatic moment (the vertical line). This means that almost all the information in the book leads up to that concluding event.

The first 6 sections of the book each have a different focus, but note that these sections run parallel to the others. The events of these sections all occur during the Church age, the interval between Pentecost and the end of the age. Each of these sections will add additional thoughts to the preceding section.

The seventh and last section describes circumstances after the end of this present age; that is, after the return of Jesus, after the defeat of Satan and his evil world system is destroyed, after the heavenly city appears.

I hope this handout gives you an understandable roadmap to follow as we push through this book. You will immediately notice that this interpretation of the book of Revelation is not the one typically espoused by most evangelical scholars. However, it is my opinion that the interpretation in these messages is the one most consistent with the Scriptures, with the fewest uncertainties, and with the fewest ties to systems of theology.

There is one more important point I want to highlight. The first 6 sections can be divided into two groups. In chapters 2 through 11 the emphasis is on the human level, on the conflicts between the Church and the world. These chapters describe physical events, such as warfare, famine, disease, earthquakes, etc. In these chapters the world attacks the Church, but we read that the sovereign Lord Jesus is present among His Churches, and the Churches will be avenged and be victorious.

In chapters 12 through 20 the conflicts faced by the Church are at a deeper spiritual level. In these chapters we will learn that the struggle of the Church is not just against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the unseen world. In chapters 12 through 20 there is a description of the forces of Satan and his methods of controlling the systems of the world. We learn that neither Satan or his forces is able to stand against the power and authority of the Lord Jesus.

That's the big picture of what we will be thinking about for the coming weeks.

In chapter 1 Jesus revealed Himself to the Apostle John in a series of visions, and instructed him to write on a scroll “what he was about to see.” What John was about to see extended from his lifetime to the distant future. Most of the information given to John is still in our future. What John wrote was intended to give believers hope and confidence throughout the Church Age, that is, throughout the past 2000 years, as well as us at the present time and believers yet to come. The bottom line is that Jesus Christ will gain the victory over Satan and the forces of evil.

In chapters 4 and 5 we will learn who is in ultimate authority over both the Church and the world. Then in chapters 6 and 7 we will learn what God will do to evildoers, those who persecute believers.

Let’s read Revelation 4:1-11

John was invited by Jesus to “come up” to heaven where he would be shown “what must take place after this,” that is, after the visions of chapters 2 and 3. In his vision John saw a throne with someone sitting on it. His vision was not too clear. It was a scene too awesome and brilliant for his eyes. The glory of what he saw was so great that it could only be described in the colors of precious stones and a rainbow. Neither the throne nor the One sitting on it are described in detail, but, based on information later in the chapter, there is no doubt about whose throne it was.

There was a reason for the “fuzziness” in John’s vision. Scripture informs us that God “lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (*1 Timothy 6:16*). When Moses asked to see the glory of the LORD, he was told, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (*Exodus 33:20*).

John saw other manifestations of the presence of God. “From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder.” These sights and sounds were present on several occasions in the Old Testament and represented the power and glory of God. For example, when the LORD appeared to Moses and the Hebrews at Mt. Sinai, “there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ... Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the LORD descended on it in fire” (*Exodus 19:16, 18*). In the book of Revelation, thunder and lightning are linked to judgment.

Before the throne “there was what looked like a sea of glass.” There is no indication of the symbolic meanings of the precious stones, the rainbow, or “what looked like a sea of glass.” All of these objects are mentioned in various verses in the Old Testament, but, generally speaking, they are picturesque ways to describe the vast expanse, the purity, glory, holiness, and transcendent “otherness” of God, all of which describe His distinctiveness and separation from physical creation. The sea will be mentioned a few more times later in this book.

As John’s eyes became accustomed to the brilliance of heaven, he also became aware that there was a circle of 24 thrones surrounding the central throne and that there were “Elders” seated on them. The function of these Elders was to worship God, “to fall down before Him,” to “lay their crowns before the throne,” and to sing their praises to the One who was seated on the throne.

There is some debate among commentators about the identity of these 24 Elders, but it is best to think of them as supernatural beings who are involved with the purposes of God on earth and His worship in heaven. It is likely that they are among the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” which were mentioned by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesian Church (*Ephesians 3:10*). We will learn more about these Elders in future messages.

John recognized other objects close to the throne. There were “seven blazing lamps” which symbolized “the seven spirits of God.” These words can also be translated “the sevenfold Spirit” of God. These lamps were first mentioned in chapter 1 (verse 4) as part of John’s greeting on behalf of the Father, Holy Spirit, and Jesus. The lamps are not the same as the “lampstands” which represented the churches in Asia Minor.

The Spirit of God is the member of the Godhead who imparts the life of God in each believer. The Holy Spirit is the connecting link between God and people of faith; the link between heaven and earth. In the Old Testament there is a reference which states that the “seven lamps” are the “seven eyes” of God (*Zechariah 4:1-10*). This is an appropriate description since it is through the Holy Spirit that God sees and understands what is happening in His creation. The Holy Spirit is before the throne.

The final objects seen by John were four very weird looking “living creatures.” Each of these four creatures resembled earthly animals, had six wings, and was full of eyes all around and within. There is a lot of speculation about what their features represent. Do the creatures represent aspects of nature? For example, wild beasts, domesticated animals, humans, birds? Do they represent power, strength, logical thinking, mobility? The ideas among commentators are numerous.

What we know with certainty is that the four living creatures are supernatural, and that they are vigilant, and that they serve as sentinels, guarding access to the throne. They were positioned very near the throne. They are responsible to protect the holiness of God. No created being will be able to approach the throne without getting past them. Nothing can be hidden from these beings. Every entity must be perfectly qualified to be in the presence of a holy God. These living creatures had one theme, one concern: “Day and night they never stopped saying, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.’”

In the Old Testament, these “living creatures” were called “cherubim.” From Genesis chapter 3 we read that the LORD God “placed ... a cherubim with a flaming sword in the Garden in Eden ... to guard the way to the tree of life.” After Adam and Eve sinned, God said that they “must not be allowed to reach out their hand and take from the tree of life and eat and live forever” (*Genesis 3:22-24*).

When God gave instructions to Moses about the construction of the Tabernacle, He said that the representation of two cherubim were to be on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. The cherubim were “to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover” (*Exodus 25:17-22*). God said that His dwelling place in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle would be between the cherubim. Thereafter the God of Israel was thought of as “enthroned between the cherubim” (*see I Sam 4:4; II Samuel 6:2; Psalm 80:1 and 99:1; etc.*).

In Isaiah, the creatures were called “seraphim” (*Isaiah 6:1-7*). Isaiah reported that “at the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.” One of the seraphs had to purify Isaiah’s lips before he could speak with God. Ezekiel was another prophet who had an encounter with four living creatures, and when they stopped flying around, Ezekiel saw “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (*Ezekiel 1:4-28*).

Since the four “living creatures” in John’s vision had positions so close to the throne, we can assume that they were of the highest order of celestial beings. Indeed, in John’s vision, they took the lead in the worship of the One on the throne. Later in the book they will take the lead in dispensing judgment.

According to verse 9, “Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to him who sits on the throne, and who lives for ever and ever, the 24 Elders also fall down ... and worship.” Notice what the Elders say: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

First, the living creatures offer praise for the eternal nature of the One who was sitting on the throne. He was the One “who was, and is, and is to come.” Then the 24 Elders praise this One for the glory of His created works. They refer to Him as “Lord and God.” Think of the implications of the phrase, “By your will all things were created and have their being.” Before and behind creation God had a plan. After creation God sustained and directed the world by His will. Thus God, the Creator and Sustainer, is sovereignly entitled to terminate this world if He wants. And because earthly creatures have rebelled against Him and failed to worship Him, the world will indeed be judged.

In closing, I want to refer back to our study of the book of Daniel. Daniel had a vision of the throne that was very similar to John’s. Let me read from Daniel chapter 7, “As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. ... The court was seated, and the books were opened” (*Daniel 7:9-10*).

“The court was seated.” It was judgment time. Daniel was the man in the Old Testament who was given details about the end of the age. What we have thought about this morning, and what we will think about next week, Revelation chapter 5, put together a picture of God the Father who is preparing to pour out His judgment on Satan and the world. He is on His throne, and His sovereign judgments will be revealed in all the future verses in this book.