

“A Glimpse into Glory” (Revelation 4:1-11)

What do you do for a living? Do you enjoy your vocation? It has been estimated that there are at least 40,000 different occupations in the United States. Yet for all that, only a small percentage of the population is completely satisfied with their jobs. Personnel problems, the lack of adequate pay, and wearisome hours of routine tasks are only some of the reasons. Few people, if any, are truly satisfied.¹

This is also true when we consider our marriages and families. Many Christians deal with constant friction and tension in their marriages and families. Even though many are devoting more time and energy to marriage and family, many Christians are unhappier than ever. We see this in our churches as well. We live in a consumer world that has infiltrated the church. Now many people come to church solely to have their needs and preferences met. When these needs are not met, dissatisfaction occurs. Even in our hobbies, we find that we are restless. Nothing ever satisfies.

This all breeds questions. Why are you here on planet earth? What is the real meaning of your life? What are you really trying to accomplish? By the time we are finished, you and I will have answers to these most important questions.

We have been studying the book of Revelation, and today we will look at chapter 4. Before we do that we need to remember where this chapter fits into the whole book. Rev 1:19 provides us with a simple outline of Revelation: **“Therefore, write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.”** **“The things you have seen”** refers to the vision of the glorified Jesus in 1:12-18. **“The things that are”** refers to the seven letters of Rev 2-3. **“The things which shall take place after these things”** refers to the visions of the rest of the book. In other words, Rev 4-22 is a prophecy of future events.²

Specifically, chapters 4 and 5 prepared John, and they prepare the reader, for the outpouring of judgments on the earth that follow in Rev 6-18. They present the place from which these judgments originate and the Person from whom they come. Before revealing these tribulation judgments, God gave John a glimpse into glory. He did this to enable the readers to view coming earthly events from a heavenly perspective.³

1. Envision your future in the present (4:1-4). In 4:1, John writes **“After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me,⁴ said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.’”** The phrase **“after these things”⁵** signals the beginning of a new section of Revelation which reveals the terrifying events that will take place in the future.⁶ This is the main section of the book and runs through 22:5. John was given a vision of heaven (cf. Ezek 1:1). In this supernatural vision he saw **“a door⁷ standing open in heaven”** and he heard a voice **“like the sound of a trumpet.”** We must pay close attention throughout the remainder of the book to note when John uses the word **“like”** (nine times in this chapter).⁸ John is not saying that the voice *is* a trumpet. Rather, he is saying that it is an authoritative voice “like” a shrill trumpet blast—powerful, dominating, overpowering, compelling, victorious.⁹ John refers to this voice as **“the first voice”** which he heard. This refers back to 1:10 and identifies the voice speaking as that of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who bids John to enter through the door into heaven. Jesus says, **“Come up here,¹⁰ and I will show you what must take place after these things.”** From this new vantage point John would receive new revelations that would be compiled to make up the book of Revelation. The word **“must”¹¹** indicates that the events God was about to reveal will indeed happen. The must is emphatic. The future is determined. This certainly would comfort the struggling believers of the seven churches. This should also comfort us today.

John writes in 4:2, **“Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne.”** As soon as John heard this invitation he experienced a spiritual transference (cf. Rev 1:10). His body remained on the earth, but he caught a glimpse of glory.¹² He saw a throne **“standing in heaven.”**¹³ The throne symbolizes the sovereign authority to rule.¹⁴ The word **“throne”** is mentioned 14 times in this one chapter.¹⁵ Yet, it is only used a total of 14 times in the other 26 books of the New Testament. That is why this chapter has been called, “the throne chapter of the Bible.”

Looking into heaven, John records that he saw **“One sitting¹⁶ on the throne”**¹⁷ (cf. Ezek 11:1, 5).¹⁸ The person on the throne was God the Father.¹⁹ Now get a grip on this: John actually saw God sitting upon His throne! Can you imagine anything more glorious? The word **“sitting”** describes the position of a king who is actively reigning. For example, if a politician is “seated,” he is said to be in office. If an unelected official is put out of office, he is said to be “unseated.” John sees God “seated,” meaning He is actively exercising the duties of His executive office, administering over the affairs of His creation.²⁰

Have you ever asked the question: where is God in all this? It’s easy to want to ask this question every time you watch the evening news or read the newspaper. This world is sinking deeper and deeper into a quagmire of sin, while the Christian community seems to be on the short end of the stick. The church appears to be making less of an impact upon our culture, not more. High profile teachers have fallen into sin. Other churches have stopped preaching the Gospel altogether. Like salt that has lost its savor, the church seems to be impotent.

It’s easy to ask, “God, are you still in control?” As we see our world falling apart all around us we must all be reminded that God is doing something. He has not resigned. He has not been impeached, nor put out of office. He’s not even up for reelection. There are no term limits to His being God.

Have you looked up lately to see God still upon His throne? Have you come to understand that His sovereign throne controls the events of your life? No matter what may seem out of control in your life, know that God is still in control.²¹ Though evil reigns for a time on earth, God will ultimately prevail. There is no attribute more comforting to God’s children than His sovereignty. Whatever your trial, whatever your test, whatever your tragedy, God is still on His throne. There are times when that is the only thing that will keep you and me going.

At his news conference on the morning after the beginning of the 2003 attacks on Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was asked by a reporter “about the apparent failure to follow the war plan.” Rumsfeld replied dryly, “I don’t believe you have the war plan.” We often approach God with a question like the reporter’s—why doesn’t He follow the plan we expect? As God told Job and countless others since then, “I don’t believe you have the plan.”²²

In 4:3, John writes, **“And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius²³ in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance.”** The sovereign Lord is described in terms of two precious stones, the jasper and the sardius. We should remember Scripture teaches, “God dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen, or can see” (1 Tim 6:16). So these stones are used to portray something of God’s eternal glory, awesome holiness, and majesty.²⁴ **“Jasper”** was a clear, crystal-like gem, a translucent rock. The jasper gem that John saw was evidently a diamond (cf. 21:11), not what we identify as a jasper today. It portrays the purity and brilliance of God’s holiness.

Since such a stone picks up and reflects light, it calls our attention to the fact that God is light, a holy God who reveals and unmasks the darkness. A “**sardius**” stone was blood red, undoubtedly portraying God’s wrath and justice, but it would also look at His redemptive work of love and grace in the person of the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world through His death on the cross.²⁵

Amid the white light of His holiness and the red flames of His judgment, John also sees a “**rainbow**” (cf. Ezek 1:28). In Old Testament times, the rainbow represented God’s faithfulness to never destroy the world again as He did with the flood (Gen 9:13-15).²⁶ It represented God’s gracious covenant with His people. It was also a sign of God’s mercy, grace, and long-suffering. Here, this “rainbow” is apparently the shape of a rainbow rather than the color of one since this one was “**emerald**” (green), portraying God’s fruitfulness. This rainbow is also said to be “**around the throne.**” Unlike the partial rainbows we generally see on earth, this one completely encircled the throne, perhaps resembling a halo.²⁷ This unending rainbow means that God’s grace will endure forever. In the midst of wrath, God remembers mercy (Lam 3:22-23). His grace triumphs over His judgment (Jas 2:13). It is His grace that prevents us from being consumed in the flames of His judgment.²⁸

In 4:4, John records another sight: “**Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.**”²⁹ John saw 24 thrones surrounding the main throne in what is obviously a subordinate relationship. Evidently, these elders will have positions of authority under God. The 24 elders don’t appear anywhere else in the Scriptures. The identity of the 24 elders (*presbuteros*) is difficult to determine. (See Addendum below) Yet I believe these elders are men. Jesus told the church at Laodicea, in chapters 2 and 3, that whoever will overcome will sit down with Me in glory. Here are some people sitting. He told the church in Thyatira, whoever was faithful would rule with Him, with a rod of iron. Here are some people with crowns who are sitting on thrones. He told the church at Sardis that if they would be faithful he would clothe them in white. Here are some people clothed in white. He told the church at Smyrna, he who overcomes, I will grant to him a crown (*stephanos*), and here are some people wearing crowns.

This verse is interesting to me because in Mark 10:35-45, John and his brother James had their eyes on a throne. Now there are 24. These thrones are in a circle, around the throne. I don’t see a “first or second chair” as James and John were hoping. Although we can’t know with certainty, I’m inclined to interpret the 24 thrones as 24 seats of authority given to the faithful. On 12 of these thrones, it is likely that the 12 disciples (minus one, replaced by Paul, I assume) are seated. In Matthew 19:28, Jesus promised His disciples 12 thrones and said they would eventually judge the twelve tribes of Israel. On the other 12 thrones are seated “elders” representing Gentile believers. The point (especially for John) is not who these “elders” are by name, but what they are doing—falling on their faces before God in worship (4:10-11).³⁰

2. Live your future in the present (4:5-11). When I was in high school, Laser Light shows at the Seattle Science Center were popular. I went to one of these with some friends and experienced the loud music and the special lighting effects. It was quite an experience. Yet, even the most spectacular Laser Light Show that clever technicians can devise pales in comparison with what takes place in 4:5.³¹ Out from the throne, we see and hear “**flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder.**” The lightning and thunder reflect the awesome majesty of God and recall the divine authority to judge.³² The wrath of God proceeds from this throne. Obviously, this is an unpopular view of God today (see Nah 1:2-3, 6). Nevertheless, the fear of God is the beginning of true worship (Prov 1:7).

The “**seven lamps of fire**”³³ are said to be the “**seven spirits of God.**”³⁴ These spirits are a reference to the sevenfold ministry of the Holy Spirit.³⁵ The “lamps” signify the unique role of the Holy Spirit in executing judgment.³⁶ The Spirit will carry out this judgment. The picture is of these torches ready to go, from God’s presence, to the earth where they will consume wickedness during the tribulation.

In 4:6, John records that “**before the throne**³⁷ **there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind.**” John gives no interpretation as to the meaning of this “**sea of glass.**”³⁸ The most likely allusion here is the “expanse” or firmament that separated the waters in Gen 1:7.³⁹ This sea then pictures an expanse that separates God in his holiness and purity from all of His sinful creation.⁴⁰ The emphasis is upon God’s awesome vastness—His transcendence and His holiness that separates Him from His creation.⁴¹

John also mentions “**four living creatures**” in 4:6. These seem to be angelic beings that reflect the attributes of God. These “**living creatures**” are mentioned in the book of Ezekiel, 12 times in the first ten chapters. Ezekiel 10:20 clearly identified the living creatures as cherubim. They form an inner circle and surround the throne and God (cf. Ezek 1:12), so they must constitute an exalted order of angelic beings. They appear similar to the seraphim (Isa 6:2) and even more like the cherubim (Ezek 1:4-14; 9:3; 10), though, because of their differences, they appear to be in a class by themselves. They appear to have a judicial function (cf. 6:1, 3, 5, 7) and to have some connection with animate creation (cf. 4:9-11; 15:7). Their many eyes evidently symbolize their penetrating intelligence that makes them immediately aware of whatever is happening that affects their judicial responsibility (cf. Ezek 1:18; 10:12). Full of eyes means they see everything.

In 4:7, John describes these four living creatures: “**The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle.**”⁴² These four characterizations are the same as those in Ezekiel 1:10 but it is difficult to decipher their meaning. Again, the word “**like**” expresses similarity. The four creatures likely represent four classes of created beings: wild beasts, domesticated animals, human beings, and flying creatures.⁴³

John then writes in 4:8 that these four living creatures have “**six wings, are full of eyes around and within;**⁴⁴ **and day and night they do not cease to say, ‘HOLY, HOLY, HOLY**⁴⁵ **IS THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY,**⁴⁶ **WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME.’**”⁴⁷ These creatures seem similar to the seraphim (lit. burning ones) of Isaiah 6:2-3, in that they each have six wings. Their many eyes suggest alertness, comprehensive knowledge, and constant vigilance (cf. Ezek 10:12). “**Around and within**” probably means that they had eyes even on the undersides of their wings so they could move their wings without interrupting their vision. Their movements did not detract from their constant vigilance. They ascribe holiness to God day and night, namely constantly, though not necessarily without stopping (cf. 1 Thess 2:9; 5:17; 2 Thess 3:8). There will be no need for rest in heaven!

This verse reveals several aspects of God’s character that are adored. First, He is worshipped as the Holy One (cf. 15:3-4; 16:5).⁴⁸ God is holy in two ways: He is separated from all that He created and is not to be identified with the physical and material universe; He is also separate from sin. The holiness of God emphasizes both His transcendence as well as His moral purity. Holiness, in this verse, refers to God’s attribute of absolute moral purity, but it also seems to mean more. The phrase (“Holy, Holy, Holy”) in 4:8, is reminiscent of the words of the seraphim in Isaiah 6:3, thereby suggesting the same God whom Isaiah envisioned as the holy One (cf. 40:25; 57:15; cf. Jer 22:29; Ezek 21:27).⁴⁹

Every year on the first Saturday in December, 2,500 of the most brilliant college students in North America take what may be the hardest math test in the world—the Putnam Competition. How tough is it? Although there are only twelve questions, the test lasts six hours. And although these are the best and brainiest young minds our country has to offer, the median score on last year’s test was one point, out of a possible 120. There’s an even tougher and higher standard: God’s holiness.⁵⁰

Second, the four living creatures acknowledge God’s sovereignty, for they refer to Him as **“the Lord God, the Almighty”** (Rev. 4:8).⁵¹ This title underscores God’s power and rulership. In Revelation, this title is applied to God the Father as the divine judgments against a rebellious world move toward their climax.⁵² Third, the four living creatures worship God as the eternal One. They herald Him as the One **“who was and who is and who is to come”** (Rev. 4:8).⁵³ This phrase speaks of the eternal nature of God who governs past, present, and future history. We should also note that, in the next two verses (4:9, 10), John also mentions the eternity of God. (God is called the One who **“lives forever and ever”**). All three of these verses speak of the past, present, and future. Time is often represented by a straight line drawn on a page. We call this a time line. To get a grasp of what the eternity of God means, when you have drawn your time line you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn.⁵⁴ What a comfort these descriptions are. How can we face life challenges? Well, the best way to face life’s changes is to look to the unchanging God.

John now brings his vision to a climax in 4:9-11. John writes, **“And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, and the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship⁵⁵ Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ‘Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power;⁵⁶ for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.’”** Whenever it is appropriate and possible the four living creatures give praise to eternal God.⁵⁷ The focus of their worship is on God’s purity, His power, and His preeminence. Giving **“glory and honor”** calls attention to the perfections of God, while giving **“thanks”** calls attention to the manifold gifts of God in creation and redemption. Knowing angels should worship God should prompt our worship also. Do we have any less to praise Him or thank Him for? Like these four living creatures, we pay God honor and reverence, not for His sake (because He is of Himself full of glory to which no creature can add anything), but for our own sake.

In 4:10, the elders follow suit. **“When”** or “whenever” the four living creatures give worship to God, the 24 elders fall down before Him out of reverence. The sequence: prostration, adoration, and humiliation. When the crowned elders prostrate themselves before God and cast their crowns at His feet, these rulers humbly acknowledge His sovereignty and His right to receive worship.⁵⁸ This verse reveals that the major purpose of crowns is as tokens of worship. This process is not a one-time event, but goes on **“when (whenever) the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne.”** Each time the rewarded believer approaches the throne, he will remove his crown and lay it before the feet of Jesus, the Christ, and worship. A central motivation for obtaining these crowns is to be found in the desire to have these expressions of worship.⁵⁹

The elders’ song is similar to that of the four living beings, but it focuses more on the wonders of God’s creation as the evidence of His glory and power. It is also directed to God directly. Their words speak of what He deserves, **“glory and honor and power”**—as well as why He deserves it—**“for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”** **“Because of Your will”** directs praise to God for the ultimate cause of creation.

Probably **“they existed, and were created”** simply credits God for the existence of all things and then stresses the fact that He brought them into existence (cf. Rom 11:33-35).⁶⁰ Astronomers estimate that there are 100 billion stars in our own galaxy—and that there may be 100 billion galaxies in the universe. God created the human brain that weighs less than three pounds, is the size of a grapefruit, and is thousands of times more powerful than the world’s most powerful computer. God made a giant sequoia tree in California that is the biggest living thing in the world. It is almost 3,000 years old, 275 feet high, and its trunk is 79 feet wide! Picture it this way: that’s as tall as a second Statue of Liberty standing on the shoulders of the real Statue of Liberty and is almost as wide as three city buses parked bumper to bumper. Your fingerprints are unlike anyone else’s fingerprints. The FBI has collected more than 170 million fingerprints and has never found two that are alike.⁶¹

A young boy was waiting after church for his family. The pastor saw him standing around and struck up a conversation. Since the boy had just come from Sunday school, the pastor decided to ask him some questions to determine just how much the children were learning there. He said, “Young man, if you can tell me something that God can do, I’ll give you a big shiny apple.” Thoughtfully the boy replied, “Sir, if you can tell me something God can’t do, I’ll give you a whole box of apples.”⁶²

God the Father is worthy of praise and worship because of two basic things we should always remember: It was His power that created all things; and it is His purpose (will) that brought everything into existence and gives meaning to it all. If we refuse to acknowledge the power and purpose of God in creation, then as Paul so graphically portrays, we deserve His judgment (Rom 1:18-23).⁶³

When I was growing up, I was really into sports. As a result, I collected autographs of a lot of famous athletes. All of creation bears God’s autograph. All creation is an outstretched finger pointing to God. We must recognize the value in what God has done. He who holds the stars in space will surely uphold His saints on earth.

This past Sunday, many of you watched the Seahawk wildcard playoff game against the Packers. It was a great game! Whether you know it or not, you worshipped. People are built to worship. People will worship something! There is hardly anything more evangelistically powerful than a group of worshipping believers.

This past Sunday, on the way home from church, I was talking with my six year old, Joshua. In the course of our conversation, I said, “Joshua, what’s your favorite thing to do?” Joshua replied, “Worship God.” Now I must tell you, this shocked me! I couldn’t have been prepared for this. I was expecting him to say, “Star Wars” or “guns.” Yet his immediate reply was, “Worship God.”

I then said, “Joshua, how do you worship God?” What he then said was even more surprising. He said, “I worship God when I go up to my room and pray secretly when no one’s listening.” Wow! This is a pretty spiritual kid! Now let’s be honest, we all know that this is the right answer to give. Yet how many of us would have been as quick as Joshua to toll this off of our tongue? I must confess, if someone had asked me the same question, I would probably have responded, “My favorite thing to do is study and teach God’s Word.”

Now obviously, there’s nothing wrong with that but God wants my study and teaching to come from a passion to know Him and to make Him known.⁶⁴ But my chief goal in life must be to worship the Lord in everything that I do. That’s why I was created.

Worship is seeing what God is worth and giving Him what He's worth. It is preparing for your glorious future. It has been well said, "Those who praise God on earth will feel at home in heaven."⁶⁵ Therefore, this passage exhorts us to begin preparing for our eternal home by worshipping the Lord. This is done in multiple ways: evangelism, discipleship, work, fellowship, etc.

Do you worship the right God in the right way? You can do this as you can begin to envision the future in the present and then live for the future in the present.

ADDENDUM: THE IDENTITY OF THE 24 ELDERS IN REVELATION 4:4

The elders are a prominent group mentioned 12 times in Rev 4-19 (4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). Yet, the identity of these elders is disputed. However, the commentary tradition has by and large narrowed it down to two dominant views. The elders either represent church-age saints or some form of angelic beings. The following thoughts reflect my internal wrestling. It is also my attempt to fairly represent both positions and defend both views as well as possible. Not all of these arguments are equally strong, nor do I agree with each line of defense. My goal is to assist the reader to decide which view is the best.

THE ELDERS REPRESENT CHURCH-AGE SAINTS

1. The elders are sitting on thrones before God (Rev 2:26-27; 3:21; 20:6; cf. Eph 2:6). While Christ is not seated on His earthly throne, these kingly ones, having been presented "blameless with great joy," must be with Him (Jude 24-25).
2. The elders are clothed in white robes. Church-age overcomers are promised white garments (Rev 3:4-5, 18; 6:11; 19:7-8). Moreover, in Revelation, only the saints wear white clothing. This is appropriate, for the church, at this time, would have been judged and rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10).
3. The elders have crowns of gold on their heads. These crowns (*stephanous*) indicate achievement and victory (Rev 2:10; 3:11). In the Epistles, believers are also promised crowns for spiritual accomplishments (1 Cor 9:25; 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Tim 4:8; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4). The Bible seems to distinguish between the word *stephanos*, which is used of a crown of reward for faithful endurance, and *diadema*, which is the crown of royalty or authority. Note: the crowning of these elders also indicates that the rapture and resurrection is past, for disembodied spirits wear no crowns.
4. The term "elder" (*presbuteros*) is only used of men in Scripture (e.g., Luke 7:3; Jas 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1). "Elders" is often used of leaders and representatives of the churches (Acts 15:2; 20:17; 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).
5. The elders are "kings and priests" (Rev 5:10). Church-age believers are a royal priesthood (Rev 1:6; 1 Pet 2:9). Since Christ is a King-Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5-7), believers who are in Christ are also king-priests.
6. The elders are carefully distinguished from both the four living creatures and the angels in Rev 5:11 and 7:11.
7. In Rev 5:9, the elders are seen singing a song of redemption. It appears that they sing of their own personal redemption because they say that God has made them to be kings and priests and they have

been redeemed out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation (Rev 5:10). Note: Exodus 15:13, 16-17 demonstrates that it is possible to sing a song about yourself in the third person.

8. The numerical adjective 24 is significant. King David divided the Levitical priesthood into 24 orders (1 Chron 24:3-5). Each order represented the entire priestly tribe and the whole nation of Israel as it functioned before God. Therefore, it is possible that the number 24 represents a larger, complete group. Some believe that the number 24 represents the 12 Apostles and the 12 Tribes. However, the Apostles were to judge the 12 Tribes. Yet, Old Testament saints are evidently not raised until after the Tribulation (Dan 12:1-2, 11-13; Isa 25:8; 26:19).
9. In the other visions of heaven in Isaiah and Ezekiel, there was only the throne and the four living creatures. There were no 24 elders. If the 24 elders were angels then they would've been in the visions of heaven in Isaiah and Ezekiel. It is significant that the 24 elders are seen in the New Testament and not in the Old Testament. It may also be significant that the elders and their thrones are not mentioned after Rev 19:7-9. From that point, the Church is seen as the bride of Christ, and evidently sits together with Christ upon His throne.
10. Many people believe that the 24 elders are angels because they interpret events to John (Rev 5:5; 7:13). We see that two angels interpreted events to John. One showed John the Harlot and the City of Babylon (Rev 17:1-19:10). The other angel showed John the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9-22:11). Both times John fell down and worshipped the angel that interpreted the events to him (Rev 19:10 & 22:8-9). He did this twice. You would think that John learned his lesson the first time. He didn't. There was something about these angels like an overwhelming presence. John never did this to the 24 elders. On two occasions, one of the 24 elders spoke to John (Rev 5:5; 7:13) and John never fell down and worshipped them. Obviously, John didn't see anything overwhelming about the 24 elders for he never attempted to worship them. The important thing is not that both the angels and the 24 elders interpret events to John but the interpretation itself. The angels show John future events and seem to focus on the two cities – Babylon and the New Jerusalem and the difference between the two. The 24 elders describe past redemption and people being redeemed to Christ. One of the elders introduced the slain Lamb (Jesus Christ) in Rev 5:5 and the white-robed multitude in Rev 7:13. Why doesn't an angel do this? Most likely, the elder can better understand this because he himself is a redeemed man.

THE ELDERS DO NOT REPRESENT CHURCH-AGE SAINTS

1. There are no other human beings in Rev 4.
2. Believers will not sit on thrones surrounding Christ's throne, they are to sit at a later time with Christ on His throne (Rev 20:4).
3. Believers will not receive their crowns until after Christ returns to the earth and overthrows His enemies.

THE ELDERS REPRESENT ANGELIC BEINGS

1. Angels are called "thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" (Col 1:16; cf. Eph 3:10; 6:12).
2. Isaiah 24:23 may be a reference to angels being called "elders" (see LXX). It is debated whether they are angels or the elders of Israel.

3. These elders (literally, “the old ones”) could be interpreted as the majesties turning their ruling authority over the earth to the Lamb (Heb 1:5-14; 2:5-8ff).
4. In Ps 89:7, God sits in the “council of His holy ones” (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Job 15:8; Jer 23:18, 22).
5. White apparel is the characteristic dress of angels (cf. Matt 28:3; Mark 16:5; John 20:12; Acts 1:10).
6. These elders wore crowns (Gk. *stephanous*). This Greek word often refers to a victor’s crown (Rev 2:10; 3:11), but John also used it to describe a crown that represents authority (Rev 6:2; 9:7; 12:1; 14:14). These crowns of gold could denote the royal dignity of those associated with the throne of God (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Ps 89:7).
7. The elders are grouped with the “living creatures” as a part of the eternal worship (Rev 4:4). No one interprets the four living creatures as men; therefore, we should not construe these elders as men.
8. The elders also serve as intermediaries and interpreters (Rev 5:5; 7:13-17).
9. Nowhere in the context is it hinted that the 24 elders are symbols of a larger group. There is no compulsion that they stand for something else.
10. One of the elders performs the same function of offering bowls of incense that is later performed by an angel (cf. Rev 5:8; 8:3). Also, in Rev 7:13, the phrase “one of the elders” indicates that the elders were separate created beings rather than corporately representing a larger group. He is separate and different both from the great multitude and from John (cf. also Rev 5:5). In Rev 7:14, this elder acts as an agent of revelation in much the same manner as angels function in Revelation (cf. Rev 1:1; 17:3; 22:6). Such duties belong only to angels (cf. Dan 9:21-27). This particular group of angels primarily assists in execution of the divine rule of the universe. They are probably part of the assembly of heavenly beings that are regularly pictured as present with God in heaven (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Ps 89:7; Isa 24:23).
11. The elders are seated on thrones (Rev 4:4; 11:16) while the saints stand before the throne (7:11).
12. The elders hold golden bowls that contain the prayers of the saints (Rev 5:8).
13. One of the elders explains who the victorious saints are (Rev 7:13-14).
14. The elders thank God for rewarding the saints (Rev 11:18).
15. In Revelation, the elders are always grouped with angels rather than men, but are distinguished from other angelic subgroups (cf. Rev 7:9-11; 19:1-4).
16. In Rev 19:4, 7, the elders are distinguished from the “Bride of the Lamb.”
17. It is logically and sequentially unlikely that the church, as the bride, would be enthroned before her Lord and husband is recognized as being worthy to rule (Rev 5:8-9).
18. In Rev. 5:10, the personal pronoun is “them” (not “us”) signifying that the redeemed are a separate class of individuals from the 24 elders.
19. The church does not appear ready to rule until Rev 19:7-8.

THE ELDERS DO NOT REPRESENT ANGELIC BEINGS

1. The author of Hebrews suggests that angels are innumerable (Heb 12:22).
2. Angels are never spoken of as seated on thrones elsewhere in the Scriptures.
3. The Scriptures never speak of angels wearing crowns to say nothing of *stephanoi* or victors' wreaths gotten as a reward for faithful endurance.
4. In what sense are angels "kings and priests" (Rev 5:10)? Angels are never spoken of as being associated in a priestly act in the Bible. In what sense are angels redeemed from every kindred and tongue and people and nation?

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Notes

¹ This statistic comes from Erwin W. Lutzer, *One Minute After You Die* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 86.

² Scholars have proposed many interpretations of the remaining chapters (Rev 4-22), but the only ones that make much sense of the text are those that see them as predicting events yet future. This is the futuristic approach. Other approaches are the following: The *idealist* (or allegorical) approach sees these chapters as containing the story of the conflict between God and Satan in the present age with a symbolic presentation of God's ultimate victory. The *preterist* approach sees these chapters as a picture of conflicts that took place in the early history of the church. Some preterist interpreters see these chapters as a symbolic revelation of God's principles of dealing with humankind throughout history. The *historical* approach interprets these chapters as a history of the church from Jesus Christ's first advent to His second advent. A major problem with the approaches just named is that their advocates do not agree with one another on the interpretation of individual passages. Only the futuristic approach has resulted in consistency in the interpretation of the major interpretive problems. This approach also has the support of 1:19 that promises a revelation of things yet future. See Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Revelation* (2003), 56: <http://www.sonlight.com/constable/notes/pdf/rev.pdf>

³ This should help us to accept the coming revelation that He will wipe out huge segments of humanity in the future.

⁴ The translation "with me" implies that John was engaged in a dialogue with the one speaking to him (Jesus) when in reality it was a one-sided conversation, with John doing all the listening. For this reason, the Greek phrase *met emou* ("with me") is better translated as "to me." See NET Study Bible Notes at www.bible.org

⁵ "After these things" typically refers back to previous events (Luke 17:8; John 5:1; 21:1; Acts 13:20; 1 Pet 1:11). See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Electronic Ed. The phrase, with variations, also introduces a new vision each time it occurs in Revelation (cf. 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1).

⁶ Posttribulationists (those who believe that Christ will return after the tribulation) argue that the phrase "after these things" refers only to the time of the vision that John saw. After the vision of Rev 2:1-3:22 he saw a vision of 4:1ff. Thus the first "after these things" in 4:1 means simply that after John saw the vision concerning the churches, he saw the vision of the heavenly throne room in 4:1ff.

⁷ The word "door" (*thura*) is used four times in Revelation. In 3:8 it is used in connection with the door of opportunity for ministry given to the church at Philadelphia. Then in 3:20 it is used twice of Christ standing at the door of the heart desiring fellowship.

⁸ Gk. *hos*: a conjunction that can mean, "like, as, that, how, about" is used 58 times in Revelation.

⁹ Steven J. Lawson, *Heaven Help Us!* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), 18.

¹⁰ This is also the command given to the two resurrected witnesses in Rev 11:12. Some consider this to be a reference to the rapture of the church; however, it may be simply a phrase in apocalyptic style that introduces John's revelatory vision (4:2).

¹¹ The word "must" (*dei*) indicates divine necessity here as it does frequently in the Gospels, especially Luke's gospel (Luke 2:49; 4:43; 13:33; 17:25; 19:5, 22; 22:37; 24:25-27, 44-46; cf. Acts 2:23-24).

¹² Rev 4:2 should remind us that there is a seen world and an unseen world. In the seen world, John was on Patmos. In the unseen world, he was in the spirit, and he looked as through a keyhole into heaven. That unseen world is more real and more important than the seen world. The unseen world controls the seen world. This is why Paul said, "while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor 4:18).

¹³ This was probably a room in the heavenly temple since later John also saw the golden altar of incense and the Ark of the Covenant there (Rev 8:3; 11:19).

¹⁴ As early as Rev 1:4, John mentioned the throne of God. In Rev 3:21, overcomers are promised a share in God's throne. Here, for the first time the throne actually appears.

¹⁵ The Greek word "throne" (*thronos*) is used 37 times in Revelation and only 14 times in the rest of the New Testament.

¹⁶ The tense of the Greek verb translated "sitting" (present participle here and in Rev 4:3) suggests continuous sitting.

¹⁷ Cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Ps 11:4; 47:8; Isa 6:1; Ezek 1:26; Dan 7:9.

¹⁸ From this point of origination proceeds the outworking of God's wrath described in the body of the Apocalypse (cf. Rev 6:10, 16-17; 14:7; 15:1; 16:5, 19; 18:20; 19:2, 11).

¹⁹ Cf. Rev 4:5; 5:5, 7; 6:16; 7:10; 19:4.

²⁰ Lawson, *Heaven Help Us!*, 31.

²¹ Lawson, *Heaven Help Us!*, 33.

²² Preaching Today Citation: Steve Johnson, “‘Little Things’ Add Up to Jumpy, But Compelling, News Coverage,” *Chicago Tribune* (3-21-03).

²³ In the Old Testament these stones had a special relationship to the tribes of Israel. Each tribe had a representative stone, which the High Priest wore on his priestly garment. As the High Priest, he was representing each tribe before God at the altar. The Jasper was the stone representing the first tribe, the tribe of Reuben. The last tribe, Benjamin, was represented by the Sardius. So these two stones represent the whole nation, the first and the last and all in between. Hampton Keathley III, *Studies in Revelation* (www.bible.org: Biblical Studies Press, 1997), 110.

²⁴ Cf. Rev 1:14; 10:1; Ezek 1:4, 26-28; 8:2; Dan 7:9.

²⁵ Perhaps it is better to think of this resemblance as denoting His anger as a reaction of His holy nature in view of the prevailing sinfulness of man and in consequence of which He is about to send judgment upon the earth, that the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.

²⁶ Usually, a rainbow appears after the storm; but here, we see it before the storm.

²⁷ The “rainbow” (*iris*) is an unusual term used only in Rev 4:3 and 10:1. The LXX (the Greek Old Testament) uses the word *toxon* for rainbow. This may suggest that the rainbow in Revelation is more like a halo. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: ECNT* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 227.

²⁸ Lawson, *Heaven Help Us!*, 36.

²⁹ For more detailed work see John P. Burke, “The Identity of the Twenty-Four Elders: A Critical Monograph on Revelation 4:4,” *Grace Journal* 2:3 (Fall 1961), 19-28.

³⁰ This insight came from personal correspondence with Bob Deffinbaugh.

³¹ Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation: Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Holman, 1998), 76.

³² Rev 6:1; 8:5; 11:19; 14:2; 16:18; 19:6; cf. Exod 19:16; Ps 29:1-3. In Revelation the symbols of thunder and lightning are always connected with a temple scene and mark an event of unusual import. R.H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation: NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 136.

³³ Gk. *lampades* (“lamps”), cf. *luchniai*, “lampstands,” Rev 1:12, 20.

³⁴ Some interpret the seven spirits of God as angelic beings.

³⁵ Rev 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6; cf. Isa 11:2-3.

³⁶ Cf. Judg 7:16, 20; Isa 4:4; Nah 2:3-4; Mal 4:1.

³⁷ This throne will be the “victory stand” for believing martyrs in Rev 15:2.

³⁸ Some commentators see the “sea of glass” as an analogy to the sea of brass in the Tabernacle or the molten sea in the Temple. Both were washstands so that the priests could cleanse themselves before entering the place of worship. The clear glass-like sea before the throne may represent the need for cleansing before approaching God. The laver (called a “sea” in the Old Testament, e.g., 1 Kgs 7:23; 2 Chron 4:2-6) served the need for cleansing in the Israelite tabernacle and temple. See Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1997), 91. Others have suggested that perhaps the fact that this sea is solid indicates that those who can approach God’s throne have attained a fixed state of holiness by God’s grace. Perhaps the sea represents the forces opposed to God’s will and His people. John now saw these forces under God’s sovereign control (cf. Exod 24:10; Ezek 1:22, 26).

³⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 231.

⁴⁰ Cf. Gen 1:7; Exod 24:10-11; 1 Kgs 7:23; Ps 104:3; Ezek 1:22, 26.

⁴¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 231.

⁴² Together they may picture all creation praising God, or God’s sovereign control over all aspects of His creation, or both. Each creature also seems to possess different qualities that are appropriate in their service of God. John described these as the outstanding qualities of animals that everyone can identify. Lions are strong (cf. Ps 103:20), oxen are servants (cf. Heb 1:14), men have intelligence (cf. Luke 15:10), and eagles are swift (cf. Dan 9:21).

⁴³ Some of the early church fathers equated these creatures with the four Gospels, but they had different opinions about which beings represented which Gospels. Some commentators have taken this further and have suggested that each creature represents a different aspect of Christ in each Gospel. Others take the beings as symbolizing attributes of God. Still others connect them with the four chief signs of the zodiac. Some believe they represent Israel because there is some connection with the pictures on the standards of Israel’s tribes (cf. Num 2:2, 10, 18, 25). Others see them as representing four outstanding apostles or other glorified men. Yet none of these interpretations seems valid. See Constable, *Notes on Revelation*, 62.

⁴⁴ Some translations render *esothēn* as “under [its] wings,” but the description could also mean, “filled all around on the outside and on the inside with eyes.” Since the referent is not available to the interpreter, the exact force is difficult to determine.

⁴⁵ In Hebrew, the double repetition of a word adds emphasis, while the rare threefold repetition designates the superlative and calls attention to the infinite holiness of God—the quality of God felt by creatures in his presence as awesomeness or fearfulness (Ps 111:9: “Holy and awesome is his name.”). See Alan F. Johnson, *Revelation*: EBC, Electronic Ed.

⁴⁶ Gk. *pantokrator* means, “all power” and is used five more times in Revelation (11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22) but is found nowhere else in the New Testament.

⁴⁷ This is the first of 14 doxologies in the book of Revelation.

⁴⁸ Of the 25 occurrences of the word “holy” (*hagios*) in Revelation only three are used of God. The other 22 refer to saints, Jerusalem, and angels.

⁴⁹ Similar to Isaiah 6:3, the words “holy, holy, holy” function as substantival adjectives, so that the words may be translated, “Holy One, Holy One, Holy One.” Wallace explains, “A substantival adjective is “used independently of a noun.... It either implies a noun or takes on the lexical nuance of a noun.” See Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Electronic Ed.

⁵⁰ Preaching Today Citation: Lev Grossman, “Crunching the Numbers,” *Time* (12-23-02), p. 51; submitted by Kevin Miller, Wheaton, Illinois.

⁵¹ This compound name appears seven times in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22) and the shorter form, “God the Almighty,” occurs twice (16:14; 19:15). It has roots in the Old Testament title “Yahweh, God of hosts.” This title (e.g., 2 Sam 5:10; Jer 5:14; Hos 12:5; Amos 3:13; 4:13) indicates Yahweh’s unrivaled power and supremacy over all things.

⁵² Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 363.

⁵³ This designation of God occurs, with variation, four other times in Revelation (1:4, 8; 11:17; 16:5). These designations derive from Exodus 3:14: “I AM WHO I AM.” This phrase emphasizes God’s self-existence, eternity, and presence. See Mazie Nakhro, “The Meaning of Worship according to the Book of Revelation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:629 (Jan 01), 76-77.

⁵⁴ Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

⁵⁵ Worship (*proskuneo*) means “to prostrate one’s self before another.”

⁵⁶ The definite article “the” (*ten*) appears before each of these three nouns “expressing the absoluteness and universality of these attributes” (cf. Rev 1:6). Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament: Vol II* (Peabody: MA: Hendrickson, reprint), 486.

⁵⁷ The twofold statement in Rev 4:9-10 that the creatures “worship Him who lives forever and ever” supports the adoration of God’s eternal existence and presence. In this sense the heavenly creatures worship God for who He is, namely, the eternally existent and present Being.

⁵⁸ Constable writes, “The Apostle Paul said he wanted to make sure he did nothing that would result in his losing his reward (1 Cor 9:27). He also used rewards as a motivation to urge Christians to serve Jesus Christ faithfully (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10). These factors have created problems for some believers. Is it not selfish to want to gain a reward? Is this not an unworthy motive for living the Christian life? I believe the answer lies in this verse. Here the 24 elders cast their crowns at the feet of the Father in worship. Since a crown is something we will give back to the Lord in worship, the desire for a crown need not be a selfish motivation. Indeed the desire to present one’s life work of faithful service as a gift to the Savior is a very unselfish and God-honoring motive. A victor’s crown is symbolic of the fact that the judge has declared the athlete victorious. Anyone can go out and buy a trophy in a store, but a trophy received as a reward for victory in competition has much greater value because of what it represents. Christians will receive crowns for finishing the race set before us faithfully, not first (i.e., before others). We do not compete against fellow believers, but we compete to overcome our spiritual enemies, namely, the world, the flesh, and the devil.” See Constable, *Notes on Revelation*, 63.

⁵⁹ See also Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 583.

⁶⁰ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 368.

⁶¹ Most of these facts came from a children’s devotional that I read to my children. I have really appreciated this interesting and relevant tool. See Andy Holmes, *Growing with Jesus* (Nashville: Tommy Nelson, 2000).

⁶² Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*.

⁶³ David Hocking, *The Coming World Leader* (Portland: Multnomah, 1988), 112.

⁶⁴ Please don't feel badly for my kids when I use them as sermon illustrations. I typically get their permission and at this age of their lives they love it...and besides they earn a dollar for every illustration I use.

⁶⁵ Leland Ryken, author and Wheaton College professor, wrote, "Earlier in this century, someone claimed that we work at our play and play at our work. Today the confusion has deepened: we worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship." Preaching Today Citation: This quote appears to be taken from Gordon Dahl, *Work, Play and Worship in a Leisure-Oriented Society* (Augsberg, 1972).