

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Five

CHAPTER FOUR

INTRODUCTION:

In chapter 1 we were introduced to Jesus, the scope of His ministry, and His present glory as it was revealed to us through John's pen. We saw Jesus as the King and High Priest of His kingdom. We saw that He holds the destiny of His universal kingdom – the church – in His hands. In chapters 2 and 3 we saw Jesus standing in the midst of the church universal, which is represented by the seven lampstands; and we witnessed the detrimental effect of Satan's influence on the members of the church. As Jesus told his apostles during the relatively short period after His resurrection but before ascending into Heaven, there would be conflict and tribulation. We saw that it had already begun by the time John wrote the book of Revelation because we read Jesus' words of commendation and encouragement to the church. We saw Jesus' promise of eternal life to those who remained faithful, but John also penned words of warning concerning the condemnation and eternal punishment that would come to those who succumbed to the forces of evil.

Those warnings enable us to understand the fierceness of the battle that has already begun between the church, with Jesus as its head; against the forces of evil, led by Satan and his minions. The remainder of the book depicts that battle as it rages down through the centuries, but also assures us of the final outcome. But at the end of the first century AD, the battle lines had been drawn and clearly set forth, and they continue to this day. Make no mistake, though,

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that outcome is certain: The victory will belong to the Almighty God, Creator and Father, with His Son Jesus, the Christ! In Heaven and in the church that Jesus established here on earth, that victory has never been in doubt! The faithful here on earth only wonder how many of their Christian brethren will succumb to the influence of evil and miss the reward promised to the faithful. That reward guarantees us victory over the evil enemy even now, while here on the earth, and eternally in Heaven with the Heavenly Host when our time here is done. But before describing the battle, though, the curtain of Heaven is drawn back to give John and, by extension all that read and understand this book, a view into Heaven where the throne and majestic court of the Ruler of Everything abides.

THE SECOND VISION

This second vision is lengthy. Some even say it extends to chapter 13 where John writes *“And I stood upon the sand of the sea...”* indicating he is back on earth, and the vision has concluded. Others insist that it encompasses the remainder of the book. Whether or not this scene ends at chapter 13 is irrelevant, but I will ask you to recall this throne scene when we get to chapter 21, because there we will see it again, but with a difference. The important thing to remember is that John is recording ALL that happens both in heaven and on earth, so it stands to reason that the remainder of the book will be taking us through that battle between right and wrong, culminating in a description of the reward for the faithful as well as the punishment of evil. That is more easily understood if we divide it into segments.

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This first part I will title **“The Throne in Heaven,”** as it is recorded in chapter 4. I encourage you to read this vision cited below slowly and carefully, letting the words paint a picture in your mind as the scene develops and John describes what he saw. You will be rewarded with a majestic view of God’s throne. There is a lot to see. Take the time to see it all. In the discussion that follows, I hope to answer questions that may have surfaced as the scene took shape in your mind.

The Throne in Heaven – Chapter Four

“After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as if it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast was like a lion, and the

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second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”

John begins chapter 4 with the statement, “*After this I looked...*” Two questions that you may have thought of are: “*After what?*” and “*How long after...?*” Those are logical questions deserving of answers, but neither will come easily because of the different views on the timeframe of the book. Even so, let’s begin with the first question: “*After what?*”

Some take the position that “*this*” refers to the present, physical world in which we live. However, if we accept that view, then it must follow that the remainder of the book – from this point on – is taking place after this present, physical world is over, which obviously would mean everything after Revelation 4:1 is occurring after the world we are living in ceases to exist.

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If we truly accept the Holy Scriptures as the pure inspired word of God, then that view cannot possibly be true. “Why?” you might ask. The pure inspired word of God cannot in any way contradict itself. It is plainly taught in 1st and 2nd Thessalonians that “*after this world is over*” it will be completely burned to nothing. It will cease to exist, and that fact alone places us in the eternal realm of God where time does not exist. Judgment will have already occurred and we will all either be in Heaven or Hell. In either scenario, we will intrinsically understand everything, and therefore have no need for the teaching in this book. As we proceed through the remaining chapters, though, we are going to see references to events happening in the world. How can that be if the world has already ended?

The phrase “*after this*” is best addressed by remembering that John claims the book to be an accurate account of the visions as they were shown to him, late in the first century AD. It is understood that John is describing the visions sequentially – as they were shown to him. With that in mind, the “*after this*” simply means the vision he is about to describe came some time after the first vision we saw, which concluded with the letters to the churches.

The question “*How long after?*” is more difficult to answer because we can’t be certain how quickly the events John describes in the book were revealed to him. As was mentioned much earlier, there are some who believe John was shown only one long, continuous vision after

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which he was given time to write the account, with the help of the Holy Spirit. The truth is, we simply don't know. John does not tell us how quickly the visions occurred or how long it took to write them down, nor does the text itself provide clues.

Personally, I lean toward the view whereby John was shown a vision (or part of a vision) then given the time to write what he saw before the next vision (or part) was shown to him. Whether John took time to write his account immediately after each vision was experienced or in some other time frame is not important as long as we accept the book to be an accurate, inspired account of the visions. There is one thing for certain: the visions are all related, each building upon the one before it. That will be obvious as we progress through them.

John has already experienced the first vision, Jesus in the midst of the lampstands, and perhaps had already penned it, when the second vision begins to unfold: John looks, and sees ***“a door opened into heaven.”*** Notice he used the word “opened” -- past tense-- to describe the doorway. This tells us he did not see the door actually opening. Rather, after seeing Jesus in the midst of the lampstands, and after being told by Him to write to the church universal, he noticed a door that had already been opened. The International Standard Version puts it this way...

“After these things I saw a door standing open in heaven.”

When you formed the scene in your mind, did you see the door open? I saw a door into Heaven that was standing open. I also saw a bright light shining down through the open

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doorway. If you saw that light shining down, you caught at least a glimpse of Heaven, because an open door allows sight into what is beyond it. Let me try to put this in perspective: You are downtown on the main street. You have parked your car and fed the parking meter to give you an hour to shop. As you walk slowly down the street, passing the stores, you look at the displays in the windows. As you pass each doorway you glance inside. There are many more things inside the stores than what is shown in the windows. The door into each store is open and perhaps a sales person is standing nearby inviting you in.

As you look through the door of one of the stores, something catches your eye. You can see enough to tell that it's something you might be interested in, but you can't get a good enough look from the sidewalk, so you enter. Now put yourself in John's position. You are the one having the vision. You look up and see the door of Heaven standing open, a tiny glimpse of it visible from where you stand. But you can't see all that is behind the door. You are craning your neck now, trying to see, wishing for a better look, when you hear a voice loud and clear. It sounds like a trumpet and is inviting you to **"Come up!"** and see the things **"which must be hereafter,"** and *"Immediately you are in the spirit."* Let's examine those two phrases that John used:

"Which must be hereafter" – This phrase is one of the reasons some people believe the remainder of the book takes place after the end of the world. They assume the word "hereafter" refers to that period after the earth has been destroyed or in regard to what comes after death. But

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neither is the case here. The Greek word rendered “hereafter” comes from the two Greek words “*Meta-tauta.*” Henry Thayer, in his Greek dictionary, says “*Meta*” means “*after*” and “*tauta*” means “*these.*” The very first verse of Revelation used the phrase “*things which must shortly come to pass.*” Thayer is essentially saying the same thing: It is the things which come “after these” things.

“Immediately I was in the spirit.” This is the same expression John used in chapter 1 to describe his condition when he saw the first vision, and it indicates that it was not his ordinary one. John uses this same expression, or a similar one, several times throughout the book and each time it carries the same meaning. The best way to consider John’s state during these instances is to say he is under the control of the Holy Spirit. It does not necessarily mean he was in a trance or dreaming, but he could have been. He is telling us he was not in his normal, day-to-day condition. Another thing to keep in mind is something we learned after sin entered the world in the Garden of Eden: one can not look upon the face of God and live. John, in this vision, is about to enter into Heaven and look upon God! The visions provide a way for John to see into heaven without harm. In this instance, the result of John being “*in the spirit*” is quickly seen: **“Behold,”** John says, and it is as if he immediately finds himself through the door – in Heaven, able to clearly see all there is to see.

You know what it is like to enter a room you have never been in before. One of two things happens when you first come through the door: either you take everything in with a quick

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scan of the space or something attracts your attention and you focus on that particular item first. If the latter is true, something caused you to settle on that object first. Perhaps it was because that item was striking in appearance or maybe it was in the center of the room. Whatever the reason, it is only after carefully studying that object that you began to look around and examine the rest.

But John is experiencing more than simply walking into an ordinary room for the first time; he is looking at Heaven! And this isn't a quiet room full of immobile objects. Things are happening! Some beings are flying; some are speaking. Things are moving about. Things are flashing. Thunderous sounds are heard....and much more. Let's keep in mind this is "first hand testimony!" It's not like sitting in a theater, a few rows back, watching a live stage play – John was right in the midst of all that is happening, and clearly able to see everything. It is a magnificent scene that cannot be taken in all at once, but his focus is drawn to that central feature – the image that "caught his eye" first. In this instance it is a throne and the One sitting on the throne.

John does not describe the throne itself – perhaps the beauty of that throne can not be described – but he did recognize it as a throne. An earthly throne represents majesty, power, and authority, and is reserved for the one who has the power, authority and dominion over his kingdom and his subjects. This throne is in Heaven! It does not sit a mere mortal king. On it sits the Creator of everything that exists! His power, authority and dominion are limitless.

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Correctly, John begins his description of what he sees with the One sitting on the throne – Yahweh, Jehovah, the God of Heaven, the Great I AM. Nowhere in the book of Revelation is Jehovah described as having a human form. There are those that draw that conclusion from the creation scene in Genesis 1:26, where Moses records God as saying, ***“Let us make man in our own image,”*** but we don’t actually know what God looks like. He cannot be thought of in physical terms because He is Spirit. Therefore we must think of Him in spirit, character and attribute. Furthermore, to veil the true meaning of John’s vision from those who would render harm to Christians if they understood what was being said, the description of God is given through symbolism.

John describes God as two brilliantly flashing gemstones. For us to “see” God in this way we must understand the symbolism that was commonly accepted by the Hebrew and Jewish communities at the time of this writing. Symbolism was deeply ingrained in Hebrew heritage and was passed down to each generation. The Jews as a whole understood it. I hope to provide a



clear, easy to understand explanation so 21st century readers can understand it as well. The two gemstones John mentions that best symbolize God’s attributes are the ***“jasper”*** and the ***“sardine”*** stones. We probably would not think of those two stones as the best ones to describe God. We might have picked a brilliant ruby, a lustrous diamond, an emerald, or maybe a perfect pearl, but John mentions jasper and sardine stones. A polished jasper stone (shown here) is an opaque,

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aggregate type of mineral that contains a bit of quartz and a few other minerals. It is most commonly found with a base color of red that is spotted or striped with black, grey or dark brown, depending on the impurities. The jasper stone was the last of the twelve stones in the High Priest's breastplate as described in Exodus 28:20 and 39:13. We will later see that it is the first of the twelve stones used in the foundation of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:19. In scripture the jasper stone is almost always referred to as *"most precious,"* or as *"like crystal."* From what we read in Revelation 4:3 we can infer that it was a stone that reflected a brilliant and transparent light. Yes, it is hard to imagine the stone shown above as being the jasper spoken of in scripture. One commentator said, *"There can be no doubt that the diamond would more adequately answer the description in the book of Revelation."* But remember, we are using pre 1st century symbolism.

The sardine or sardius stone is shown in this image. Notice how similar it is to the jasper stone. The sardine stone is most often described as the color of "raw flesh," and that doesn't sound like a beautiful stone at all. When polished, though, it becomes a blood red gem. It is more often called a "sardius" stone because it was obtained from Sardis in Lydia. We must understand, the importance of these two stones as they appear in the book of Revelation is not in what they look like, but rather, in the definite symbolic importance associated with them. On the next page I have included an image that depicts the breastplate of the High Priest. It was made of solid gold, and set into the gold were twelve



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precious stones, each symbolizing a specific characteristic of a high priest. The stones were set in four rows of three stones each. The jasper stone is symbolically descriptive of God's ***"holiness and righteousness"*** whereas the sardine (sardius) stone is the symbol of God's ***"justice and Divine judgment."*** The Sardine stone was the first precious stone in the breastplate, located in the upper corner on the Priest's right side. The jasper stone was the last gem in the breastplate located on the Priest's lower left side. There is significance in all the stones of the breastplate, but the symbolism and placement of the sardine and jasper stones in particular tell us that, of the priest's multiple traits, all were sandwiched between ***"justice and divine judgment"*** and ***"holiness and righteousness."*** In the vision John had, we can see how that symbolism extends to and applies to God, for He is always holy and righteous and His judgments are always just and fair.

The next thing John mentions seeing in the throne scene is what he describes as ***"a rainbow, in sight like unto an emerald,"*** and he says that rainbow is ***"round about the throne."*** We might picture an aura that hovers over and around the throne, possibly even enveloping the throne and those near it. John's use of the term ***"rainbow"*** is significant. Bible students will recognize the rainbow as God's symbol of **promise**. He placed the rainbow in the sky after the great flood as a "sign" that He would never again destroy the inhabitants of earth by water. God

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has kept that promise just as He will continue to keep ALL of His promises. The rainbow, then, became the biblical symbol of the keeping of promises. But just as important as the rainbow's significance, is its appearance being *"like unto an Emerald."* This part of the vision is not often discussed, overshadowed by our focus on the rainbow and its obvious meaning. However, the "rainbow" John describes has only one color! He says the rainbow is *"like unto an emerald!"* Most commentators believe the emerald stone was the same then as it is now. Of course there are different grades of emeralds, and contrary to what you might think, the one most prized – the one most valuable – is not that gleaming stone found in many pieces of jewelry, but the stone with the velvety green color as shown here. The actual color of the rainbow isn't mentioned, but is inferred by the name of the stone itself. From John's description, it sounds as if the green glow from the emerald formed a sort of halo or umbrella as it shone above and around the throne and perhaps extended out to encompass the 24 elders that encircled the throne. Many Old Testament scholars consider the emerald to be a symbol of *"mercy"* and if that is indeed correct, it would have been a source of comfort to those being persecuted at that time. Considering the symbolism encountered thus far, we can agree on six characteristic traits of God based on that symbolism:



Divine Judgment

Divine Justice

Mercy that He sheds on His people

Righteousness

Holiness

Faithfulness to keep His promises

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But there is more to see: Around (encircling) the throne, are 24 seats, occupied by “elders.” Each of the 24 elders is wearing white raiment and a crown on his head. The 24 seats appear to be seats of authority associated with the central throne. Some historians say the arrangement was similar to the Sanhedrin court which had all seats arranged in a circle. The image we should form in our minds is a completely unobstructed view of the occupant on the central throne. Who can these 24 “elders” be, and what does this all mean? Well notice that the 24 “elders” were all arrayed in white garments and were wearing golden crowns. Symbolically, “white” is considered to be a “heavenly” color that represents *purity and holiness*. The 110th Psalm records that only those arrayed in the “*beauty of holiness*” are permitted to worship in the Divine presence. We can rest assured that Heaven is ONLY comprised of those who are Holy, as the white raiment symbolizes. Also, each of these 24 elders was wearing a golden crown. The Greek word rendered “crown” is “*stephano*” meaning “a crown, wreath or garland given as a prize to victors in public games.” It is the sign of victory! These golden crowns of victory likely represent the eternal reward which will be given to genuine servants of God and Christ, for their righteousness. So who, or what, do the 24 “elders” sitting on the seats around the throne represent? There are a variety of views, among which are:

1. The elders of the church at Jerusalem...
2. Higher Angels...
3. The original Hebrew Bible (Tanakh, which consisted of 24 books)...
4. A “double twelve” representing both the major and minor prophets...

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But perhaps the most correct view comes from Henry Donald Maurice Spence-Jones (hereafter referred to simply as “Spence”) in the Pulpit Commentaries, along with Homer Hailey in his book: “REVELATION: An Introduction and Commentary.” Both of these men arrived at the conclusion that the 24 elders represent *the redeemed of God from both covenants*. The number twelve has long been accepted among devout bible students as the “religious” number, and we would have a “double twelve” if we considered the Old Covenant represented by the 12 patriarchs over the tribes of Israel as the first, and the New Covenant represented by the Apostles (“The Twelve”) as the second. It is a certainty that the Hebrew writer, in the ninth chapter, spends a good bit of time showing that those who lived faithfully under the Old Covenant received their inheritance through Jesus, as do all who have lived faithfully under the New Covenant:

“For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”

(Hebrews 9:13-15 KJV)

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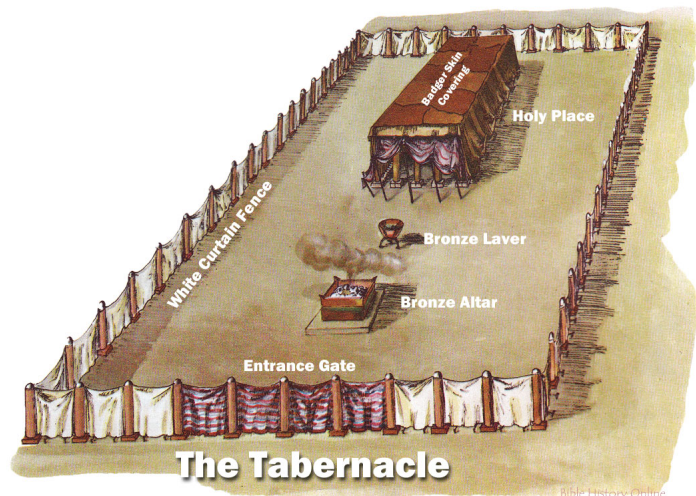
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John also sees “lightning, thunder, and voices” proceeding out of the throne and seven lamps of fire burning before the throne. You may recall when God descended to the top of Mt. Sinai to meet with Moses and address His people, He came with “thundering and lightning,” and His voice was like a trumpet. As John tells us, the seven burning lamps represent the Holy Spirit. It is my belief that this mighty phenomenon symbolizes the “whole” of divine power, majesty, and glory which were awesome to John, the one beholding this sight.

Moreover, before the throne was “*a sea of glass like unto crystal.*” Pay particular attention to where the sea of glass is located: it is not “around” the throne, but it is BEFORE the throne. The significance of this sea of glass is that it separates the One on the Throne from those that would approach it. Some say the

“sea of glass” represents the bronze laver that was placed between the Holy Place and the bronze altar in the tabernacle as shown in this image. The tabernacle, of course, was the mobile place of worship assembled each time



the Israelites settled in the desert during their 40 years of wandering. The bronze laver was for Aaron and his sons (the priests) to wash their hands and feet before they entered the holy place (Exodus 30:20ff). The priests also had to wash their hands and their feet before they approached

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the altar with a food offering (verse 21). God declared that the washing of the priests was to be observed by Aaron and his descendants throughout the ages, for as long as their priesthood lasted. God wanted His people to understand the importance of purity. Deeming the “sea of glass” to represent that bronze laver seems a little inappropriate, however, since in Heaven where all is pure and clean, there would be no need for the laver of washing! Some commentators believe it to be symbolic of baptism – which allows access to God through Jesus. Before we accept this explanation, though, we should realize what a great difference there is between the Creator and us, the creature. We know we cannot enter Heaven with this mortal body; first we must put on incorruption.

Could it be that this sea of glass represents the superior aspect of God that keeps us from being able to see Him as He is *until we are like Him*? I say that because, when the present order has passed away and we are at home with God, 1st John 3:2 tells us, *“We are like Him.”* To further uphold that view be aware that in Revelation 21:1, when we see the New Heaven and the New Earth descending, the Throne Scene is revisited, except *“the sea is no more!”*

As John continues to relate what he sees in the midst of the throne and round about it he sees four beasts full of eyes *“before and behind.”* Later we will see some truly fearsome beasts, but these are not like those. A better translation from Greek to English might refer to them as four “living creatures” with the emphasis on “living.” Much has been written about the meaning

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attached to these four living creatures, but almost all commentators agree that they are in some manner connected to the “Seraphim and Cherubim” mentioned in Isaiah and Ezekiel:

Isaiah records, *“In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

Ezekiel records, *“Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot: and they sparkled like the color of burnished brass. And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and they four had their faces and their wings.”*

While there are certainly some differences between the two scriptures, let's focus on the similarities. I wonder what mental picture the Jews had when they heard the terms *“Seraphim and Cherubim.”* Of course in the Old Testament, they are always pictured as the attendants of God and as workers of His purposes and judgments: We see them in Genesis 3 as the guardians

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of the Garden of Eden with a flaming sword after Adam and Eve are told to leave. In II Samuel, after the Philistine giant Goliath was killed by David, songs were sung about David in which, God was pictured as riding on a Cherubim. And, of course, in Exodus 25 the Mercy seat is placed on top of the Ark of the Covenant, and we are told that God would commune with His people from the Mercy Seat between the Cherubim and Seraphim. Does that mean that there is such a being as cherubim and seraphim? I don't know. It is thought that these cherubim and seraphim are in reality manifestations of God's omnipotence and omniscience. Perhaps that is the correct answer. I don't know if there was a difference in the whole form of the creatures or just their faces, but John describes one as having the face of a lion, one the face of a calf, one the face of a man, and the last like a flying eagle. It is possible that these living creatures represent the four most conspicuous orders of life: wild animals, domestic animals, birds, and man. Whatever the truth is, these representatives give honor and glory to the Creator.

Each of the four living creatures had six wings, were full of eyes, and did not rest day or night, but continually repeated ***“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.”*** Isaiah records that two of the wings covered the face, two covered the feet and two were used for flying. The use of four wings to cover the face and feet symbolizes: reverence, humility and obedience. Being ***“full of eyes”*** represents being ever watchful, in ceaseless activity, seeing and knowing all. And while earthly creatures require rest to survive, these heavenly creatures do not. They maintained a constant vigil over God's creation, and they

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praised Jehovah before His throne. Perhaps you have wondered why in the phrase “Holy, Holy, Holy,” the word Holy is repeated three times. Some say it is to embrace the “Trinity” concept of Deity. However, since apocalyptic literature is symbolic, and since we know the meaning of the number three, I believe repeating the word Holy three times might carry the meaning of the perfect, (complete) absolute, holiness of God. The living creatures repeated the phrase, *“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.”* It might interest you to learn that the word “Almighty” is used a total of 57 times in the Bible: 47 times in the Old Testament, and 10 times in the New Testament. Nine of those New Testament references are in the book of Revelation, and in every one of the 57 occurrences, it refers to God the Creator.

The next thing John tells us is that every time those living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to God, the 24 elders fall down before Him that sits on the throne and worship Him. They cast their crowns before the throne saying, *“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”*

Before closing this part, and with the hope it will help us all to have the same mental image of this vision, I have drawn a sketch of what I see John describing in this segment. It is an “overhead view” of the throne scene: God is sitting on the throne in the center, under the crown, with the seven torches symbolizing the Holy Spirit arranged around Him. The 24 elders are sitting on smaller thrones arranged in a circle around God’s throne. The four “living creatures”

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are shown at the four “corners” of the throne scene and are depicted as the image of their faces: as an eagle, a lion, a bull, and a man. The aura of the emerald rainbow glows all around this central image.

