

Who's in Charge

Revelation 4:1-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 28, 2021 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ²At once I was in the spirit,^[a] and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! ³And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. ⁴Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; ⁶and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

"Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come."

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

¹¹"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."
(Revelation 4:1-11, NRSV)



Mr. Miller was my 2nd year Spanish teacher in 10th grade. Very lovely man. Excellent grasp of the Spanish language. Terrible classroom manager. It was Lord of the Flies every day during 3rd period. And I went to an all-boys high school, which made it worse. Every time he would turn around to write on the chalkboard (remember those?), chaos would ensue. I vividly remember the spitballs. More paper was used in that class to make spitballs than to do Spanish assignments. At one point kids didn't even wait until he turned around to the chalkboard. Even as a kid I remember thinking, who's in charge here? Nobody was in charge. It was *muy caótico*. That's "very chaotic" in Spanish. And no, I didn't get that from Mr. Miller. From his class I only remember the spitballs.

Who's in charge? It's one thing when you're asking that question in your high school Spanish class. It's quite another thing when you're asking that question about the whole world. When a massive tsunami killed more than 250,000 people around the rim of the Indian Ocean in 2004, newspapers and magazines were full of letters and articles asking that question. One reporter wrote, "If God is God, he's not good. If God is good, he's not God. You can't have it both ways."¹ There is, to be certain, much good and beauty in our world. At the same time, there is also much chaos. Mass shootings, deep political unrest and division, racism that never seems to end, one natural disaster after another, incalculable injustice. Closer to home, some of you have faced such hardship and pain in your lives that you have begun to wonder if anybody out there is looking out for you. It's no wonder that so many people, even in church on a Sunday morning, are asking this question: who exactly is in charge of this world?

It's not a new question. John is the author of Revelation. This beloved disciple of Jesus was an old man when he wrote these words. He was spending his last days as an exile on the God-forsaken island of Patmos, a pile of rocks in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea where Rome sent people like John who refused to worship Caesar as Lord. This was the last part of the 1st century when all hell seemed to be breaking loose in the church. The emperor Nero started feeding Christians to the lions in 57 A.D. Peter and Paul were crucified around that time. Towards the

¹ Cited by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, 2008), 23.

end of the century the Emperor Domitian expanded his “reign of terror” and had more than 40,000 Christians executed. Timothy was beaten to death. Now John was left to rot on Patmos.² Who is in charge? It’s not hard to imagine that more than a few of those early believers were asking that question.

But then John is given this apocalypse. That’s the Greek word for “revelation”. One Sunday morning as he is worshipping alone on Patmos a voice speaks to him with an invitation to look and behold things not as they seem to be, but as they truly are. That’s what Revelation is, a peek behind the curtain to see things as they really are. Some people consider chapter 4, the chapter that we just read, the most beautiful chapter in the whole Bible because of what it reveals to us. A door opens before John and he is invited to look inside to glimpse heaven itself. It’s a reminder to us that heaven and earth are not separated by such a great divide as we might imagine.

That’s the way we’ve been taught to think about it – right? - that heaven is way up there somewhere. But that’s not the way the Bible speaks about heaven. Remember that Jesus himself told us, **“The kingdom of God is among you.”**³ You know this. There have been times in your life when you have sensed a deeper, more permanent reality very close at hand. It might be the breathtaking beauty of a sunset, or the profound innocence of a child’s observation, or a meal of good food shared with good friends that seems like it was meant to never end, or the voice of God that comes to you unexpectedly in a quiet place reminding you that he is closer to you than you realized. The Celtic Christians called these instances “thin places”, places and moments in life when the veil between heaven and earth is almost transparent.

I have a friend who worked in the Bush White House. It was fascinating to talk with somebody who had actually spent significant time in the Oval Office. Through his experience I was given a peek behind the curtain into what things were really like in that place. But forget about the White House, this is heaven we are talking about here. And through John’s experience we are given a peek into the very Kingdom of God. And remember, what’s revealed here is not what heaven will be like some day. This is a glimpse into heaven *as it exists today!* If we could see heaven as it now is, we wouldn’t need this revelation. We can’t see it. It’s why we need to pay close attention to what John has handed down to us. Let us behold what it is that John beholds.

The first thing that John sees when he looks through this open door into heaven is a throne. Now, this is a tricky one for us because Americans don’t think much of thrones. In fact, we overthrew one particular throne a long time ago and we’ve never looked back. Throne in our context is now slang for toilet, as in, “He’s in there sitting on his porcelain throne.” That’s what Americans think about thrones. So we need to be reminded that a throne centers power and authority. A throne is the supreme headquarters, the control center of the entire realm. In our physical universe you might say that our sun is the throne. Everything revolves around the sun, our very planet’s orbit is established by it. If the sun were to disappear one day, all life would almost instantly cease to exist, as earth would be flung off into space at about 70,000 miles per hour.

Some of you may know that this throne is the dominant image in Revelation. John mentions it 47 times throughout the book. It’s the first thing he sees when he gazes into heaven, meaning that at the center of existence there is a supreme headquarters, a source of all power and all authority. We may not realize it from our vantage point, but there is somebody in charge after all. The throne exists, and it is not empty. Right now God sits on the throne. John writes, **“...there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!”** Later we learn that this is one who is **“Holy, holy, holy!”** This one is entirely other and distinct and set apart, unlike anyone or anything else in all creation, absolutely pure. Holiness is the essential, fundamental attribute of God. This is **“the Lord God the Almighty.”** This is one who has all might and all power and all strength, absolutely sovereign.

As we continue reading we are treated to more stunning details. Remember that this is poetic language, not meant to be taken literally. If I describe somebody to you by saying he was a “mountain of a man”, or that she has “eyes like the stars in the sky”, you don’t assume I’m describing a man who literally looks like a mountain or a woman who has bright shining lights where her eyeballs should be. There is truth here, but we have to use our imaginations to get at it.

We’re told here that the one seated on the throne **“looks like jasper and carnelian.”** Imagine a beautiful translucent stone through which light is magnified and by which all the colors of the spectrum are intensified. It’s John’s way of saying that our world, because of what we have done to it, has been made flat, dull, and colorless. C.S. Lewis called our present world the “shadowlands”. By contrast, heaven, with God at the

² Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge* (Regent College Publishing, 2004), 132-133.

³ Luke 17:21. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

center, is brilliant, radiant, dazzling even beyond description. It's why the psalmist only asks for one thing, **"to behold the beauty of the Lord."**⁴ God in heaven is beautiful.

Beauty is accompanied by power. Verse 5: **"Coming from the throne are flashes of lighting, and rumblings and peals of thunder..."** This takes us back to Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai when the thunder was so intense that all the people trembled with fear.⁵ When God speaks it's like thunder. In other words, he's not playing games with us and we would be wise to listen to God's voice. In fact, in Revelation God never does anything but sit on the throne. He never once stands up. He never even lifts a finger. All he does is speak. But that's enough, because the moment a word is out of his mouth it is realized. Think of the creation story in Genesis. God only needs to speak and the universe comes into being. This is ultimate power and authority. Once God wills something and voices his will, it becomes reality. Who else has that sort of power and authority? Nobody.

Power, however, is accompanied by mercy. Verse 3: **"Around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald."** From the time of Noah, the rainbow in scripture is understood as a symbol of God's mercy and faithfulness. Yes, God is all-powerful, righteous and holy, sovereign beyond all, but he is also full of grace. A holy God who welcomes the unholy. The rainbow around his throne reminds us that it is safe to come as you receive his grace. His judgements are merciful. New creation is possible.⁶

Finally, mercy is accompanied by victory. Verse 6: **"...in front of the throne there is something like sea of glass, like crystal."** It's a water-skiers' delight, perfectly calm waters. In the ancient world, however, the sea was to be feared, a place of chaos. People were terrified of the sea. Many still are. In Revelation – and we will see this as we go along – all evil comes from the chaos of the sea. The great beast in Revelation 13 rises up out of the sea. But here it is revealed that the sea before the throne of God is perfectly calm. Evil, at least for now, is still present; the vision doesn't deny that evil exists. But in the presence of God it is absolutely subdued, powerless and pacified.

I know that this is not how it might seem from your perspective. How can we say that evil in this world has been subdued when it seems to be having its way

everywhere we look? But this is nonetheless what the revelation tells us. Terrorism and violence exist; they will not win. Racism has its days numbered. The cancer will not be in your body forever. The crushing weight of your guilt and shame will be lifted. Those who persist in doing evil in this world, and strut around as they do so, will one day be humbled. It takes faith to believe this, but we must try to have faith because this is the way things actually are. In fact, in the end of Revelation, which describes the end of time, we read this, **"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more."**⁷ Evil does not win. It is under God's sovereign rule, contained within his purposes, and eventually overthrown. In spite of how things appear, we must believe this.

Essentially holy. Almighty and sovereign, speaking his will into reality. Beautiful beyond comparison. Merciful beyond comprehension. Victorious over all evil. If this is who is on the throne in heaven is it any wonder that anybody and everybody in the presence of that throne is doing one thing and one thing only? In fact, it's the only thing anybody can do in the presence of God. Worship. Nobody stands before God and does anything else.

This is hard for people like us. As theologian J.I. Packer puts it, "We are modern people, and modern people, though they cherish great thoughts of themselves, have as a rule small thoughts about God."⁸ It's why the faith of even many Christians today is so feeble and their worship so flabby. The ancient Jews wouldn't even speak the name of God aloud. We use it like we use the name of our best buddy, or worse as a curse word or thoughtless expression of surprise. But nobody who has a right understanding of God, as God truly is, approaches God this way. There is no limit to God's power, his presence, his knowledge, his glory. God is one who, with the breadth of his hand, has marked off the heavens. God is one for whom the nations are like a drop of water in a bucket and all the people of the world like grasshoppers. God is one who brings kings and presidents to nothing. God is one from whom not even a single person can hide a single thought or intention.

Everybody in the Bible who meets God in a thin place in this world falls, literally or figuratively, to their knees in reverent and humble worship. Moses hid his face at the burning bush. Isaiah cried out in the presence of God, **"Woe is me! I am lost!"**⁹ Peter falls

⁴ Psalm 27:4

⁵ Exodus 19:16: **"On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled."**

⁶ Darrell Johnson, 135-136.

⁷ Revelation 21:1. Remember also Psalm 89:8-9: **"O Lord God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, O Lord? Your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them."**

⁸ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (InterVarsity Press, 1973), 83.

⁹ Isaiah 6:5

on his knees in the fishing boat after realizing who Jesus is and begs Jesus, “**Leave me, Lord, for I’m a sinner!**”¹⁰ Paul literally falls off his horse blind when he meets Jesus on the road one day. In fact, think of all the times when people bow before Jesus in the Gospels. Never once does he tell them to get up off their knees and take him off a pedestal. As he rides into the Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and the crowds put him on a donkey, lay down their coats before him, wave palm branches as he passes, and hail him the Lord, the King of Israel, he lets them do it. To let others worship you in this way you’ve either got to be an egomaniac of monstrous proportions, or the creator of all things and, therefore, actually worthy of such worship.

The English word for “worship” in the Old English is “worth-ship”. That’s what worship is, the acknowledgement of worth. It’s why the worship of idols, of anything else besides God really, is so utterly condemned in scripture because nothing else is worthy. The word “worship” here that John uses in verse 10 is the Greek word *proskuneo*. Scholars think it was originally derived from a word meaning “to kiss”, and may have referred to the way a dog might lick its master’s hand. I found that interesting because – and I don’t want this to come across the wrong way – I’ve been noticing recently that our dog, Cooper, worships me. When I’m sitting down reading or watching TV, he will come up, put his chin on my knee, and just stare up at me with a look of absolute affection and adoration. It’s quite the ego boost. Of course, I’m afraid that if he knew everything about me, he might look at me differently. Also, to be clear he’s the only one in the world who looks at me this way.

But notice that John records here that everyone and everything in the presence of God’s throne is declaring that God is worthy. Most scholars agree that the 24 elders on the 24 thrones symbolize the 12 tribes of Israel plus the 12 disciples. In other words, this group symbolizes the redeemed people of God of all time. Every believer who has gone before us is among that number. Every one of us, as we place our faith in Christ, will one day be among that number gathered around the throne. Each is clothed in a white robe, symbolizing the purity won for them by the blood of Christ. Each wears a crown, symbolizing that God’s people will one day rule over creation with God, our crowns symbolizing that we will then represent *the* crown.

In addition to God’s people, there are four mysterious creatures also declaring that God alone is worthy. This is mysterious, but most scholars agree that these

creatures represent creation itself. The lion is the king of wild beasts, the ox the massive leader of domesticated animals, the eagle the undisputed greatest among all birds, and the human the wisest of all creatures.¹¹ The number four has always represented the natural order – the four corners of the world, the four winds, the four elements of nature. The Bible regularly speaks about this reality, that nature itself worships God. Psalm 19:1 come to mind: “**The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.**”

Remember that this is a vision of what is happening now. In this very moment this is the scene in heaven, all God’s redeemed, all creation itself, worshipping God as the Holy one, the Almighty, the was, the is, the coming one, the only one worthy to receive glory, honor and power, for through God, and for God, and by God all things were created. What that means is that as we gather for worship this morning we are simply joining in on a worship service that is already in progress. Heaven takes the lead and we follow and join the song.

By the way, I don’t believe that heaven is simply one long eternal worship service, hymn after hymn after hymn, a never-ending sermon (can you image!). When I was a kid I distinctly remember sitting in church and hearing passages like this and getting worried that might be the case. I love singing in worship now. I didn’t then. So I remember thinking that if heaven was one never-ending hymn-sing I needed to start weighing my options. So no, while clearly there is singing in heaven, there is also work, and play, and meals, and adventure, and all the good activity God intended for earth, only then it will be finally and fully redeemed. But all of it will still be worship, centered around the throne and directed at the worthy One who sits there.

Above all today I pray that this glimpse we have been given into heaven as it now is will help you to realize that things are not as they seem to be in our world. There is a deeper reality which most people completely miss, a deeper *and* enduring reality. We must not miss it. Most of us are old enough to think back even in our lifetimes and remember the figures in our world who were once revered, even worshipped, by millions. Political leaders, celebrities, and professional athletes who sat on their little thrones and received the worship and adoration of the masses. I could list you name after name after name. And yet where are they now? 1st Peter 1:24 declares, “**All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls...**”

¹⁰ Luke 5:8

¹¹ N.T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2011), 47.

The story is told that the priest conducting the funeral of Louis XIV, King of France, at one point looked down at the casket containing the body of the once-great monarch. The body was covered “with the luxurious robes of royalty concealing the cold within.” The priest, after a moment of silent reflection, then turned to the assembled nobility and said, “My friends, only God is great.”¹² Only God knows if they believed him. But they should have, as the evidence lay lifeless in the casket before them.

As we make our way through Revelation, exploring this glimpse into heaven passed down to us from John, it is the throne of heaven which will continue to be the center of gravity. It appears in nearly every chapter. There is no question as to who is in charge, who is sovereign, who has and will overcome. The only question will be our position relative to the throne. Will we recognize God for who he truly is and will we then gladly join others who will forever proclaim him worthy? Nothing else ultimately matters in life. And whether or not this vision of God causes you to rejoice or disturbs you, either way it is meant to draw you in. All are truly welcome!

What strikes me most in all this, and what ultimately has drawn me in to throw my crown at the feet of this throne, is the fact that not only is God the one for whom and by whom all things were created, the holy, all-powerful, merciful, Lord of life, but that this same God, who is so highly exalted, would come so low to save me. Five days after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the sounds of rightly-directed worship from the crowds, he allowed those same crowds to falsely condemn him, spit on him, torture him, reject, deny and betray him, and nail him to a cross until he bled to death as they cheered on his demise from below. And so I ask, how in the world could one who is so high above us come and humble himself so far beneath us, especially when he hated him for doing so? What sort of God is this?

There’s a Phil Keaggy song called *Maker of the Universe* which has been on my mind all week as I reflected on this unexplainable event of the Creator of the universe dying in shame on the cross. The lyrics of the song are so good that I want to read them all to you. I’ll also let them close this message.

The Maker of the universe,
As Man for man was made a curse.
The claims of Law which He had made,
Unto the uttermost He paid.
His holy fingers made the bough,

Which grew the thorns that crowned His brow.
The nails that pierced His hands were mined
In secret places He designed.

He made the forest whence there sprung
The tree on which His body hung.
He died upon a cross of wood,
Yet made the hill on which it stood.
The sky that darkened o’er His head,
By Him above the earth was spread.
The sun that hid from Him its face
By His decree was poised in space.

The spear which spilled His precious blood
Was tempered in the fires of God.
The grave in which His form was laid
Was hewn in rocks His hands had made.

But then the song ends with this final verse:

The throne on which He now appears
Was His for everlasting years.
But a new glory crowns His brow
And every knee to Him shall bow.¹³

“Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come... You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things and by your will they existed and were created.”

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage again from Revelation 4:1-11. There is so much here to take in. What stands out to you from this glimpse into heaven as it is now? Is this how you imagine the scene in heaven right now?
2. Do you ever look around our world today and wonder to yourself (or aloud!), “Who’s in charge?”
3. Can you take John at his word when he tells us here that he has seen that God actually is on the throne and in absolute authority over all things in all creation?

¹² Cited by Darrell Johnson, 134.

¹³ Phil Keaggy, “The Maker of the Universe”. Listen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27GUZsrhxJ8>

4. If somebody asked you why God is worthy of our worship, what would you tell them?
5. J.I. Packer suggests that, “as a rule, we have small thoughts about God.” Is he right? How are your thoughts about God inadequate to who God actually is? How has this passage challenged those perceptions?
6. What is Jesus saying to you in this message today? How does he want you to respond?
7. What word of hope did you need to receive today from this revelation of heaven as it is now?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



*Why should we worship God?
What does it mean to worship God?*

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday:	John 12:1-11 / Psalm 58
Tuesday:	John 12:12-36 / Psalm 59
Wednesday:	John 13:21-32 / Psalm 60
Thursday:	John 13:1-17 / Psalm 61
Friday:	John 18:1 – 19:42 / Psalm 62
Saturday:	Job 14 / Psalm 63
Sunday:	John 20:1-18 / Psalm 64