

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE ONE WHO SITS ON THE THRONE

“Chapter 4 introduces the second of seven visions Jesus gave to John on the isle of Patmos. In the first vision, Jesus dictated word for word the letters to the seven churches. In those seven letters, John recorded language rich with symbolism. Now John begins to see visions, and for the most part, he must translate into human words the divinely revealed pictures he is shown. The language becomes even more beautiful, more symbolic, and thus more difficult for us to comprehend at times. The beginning of the second vision provides a key to understanding how all the visions relate to one another. John writes, *After this I looked*. The passing of time related by *after* refers to the passing of time in regard to the author, John, not to the events in the vision. What happens in the second and subsequent visions does not happen in historical sequence. John, of course, saw them in order, one after another. But the visions themselves pertain to many events that happen within the general time frame of the New Testament period and the judgment. John’s references to the passing of time in the last six visions prove this. The adverbs that indicate time has elapsed usually modify John’s action (*Then*, 5:1; 6:1; *After this*, 7:1, etc.). On occasion, we will note the passing of time within a vision and from one vision to the next. But when John says, *After this I*, he is talking about time that passed for him.”¹

- I. **THE SUMMARY.** Dispensationalists point to John’s being taken up into heaven as a type or picture of The Church being raptured before the great tribulation. But, as Boice accurately observed, “there is no reason to interpret any of these words in that way. John’s experience of being caught up to heaven is not the rapture of the saints – even assuming that there is such a thing as a rapture. This experience is his alone, meaning that he alone is given the revelation that he is now communicating to us. Again, *after this* does not carry such a heavy weight of chronology. The phrase occurs again and again in Revelation (see Rev. 7:9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1; 20:3) and most often refers merely to a sequence of disclosures. In chapter 4, all that it indicates is that after John received the letters to the seven churches, he heard a voice summoning him to the vision of chapters 4 and 5. That is, this is a sequence of John’s experiences, not of historical events. We have to remember the purpose of Revelation: to show us everything from God’s point of view. The throne-room vision of chapters 4 and 5 is to remind believers at all times and in all places that the holy, omnipotent, and omniscient God is in control of history. Moreover, since this is also a worship scene, it tells us that because God is in control of all things, we and all the creation must make it our primary activity and duty to worship him.”²
- II. **THE THRONE.** The Greek word *thronos* is used sixty-two times in the New Testament and forty-seven are found in Revelation. The word denotes a royal throne with emphasis on God’s power, majesty and authority. “The special nature of God’s kingship is seen in the awesome throne-vision of Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-13; cf. also 1 Kgs 22:19), but most clearly in Ezek

1:4-28. Here Yahweh's kingly power is seen under the symbolism of transcendent creatures, representing the world rule of their Lord. They each have four faces, representing God's omnipresence, and face the world, while above their outspread wings, *sparkling like crystal, and awesome* (1:22), stands the vault of heaven. It is above this world, that is to say, entirely and inaccessibly out of human reach, that God's throne is seen, surrounded by an unearthly brightness. Here is a pictorial rather than conceptual description of the sheer transcendence of God and of his omnipresence in the world."³ Aune points out that the term *throne* (which can be used by figurative extension, to mean a *ruling power* or a *supernatural force or power*) is used in this context as a circumlocution for the name of God, as in Rev. 7:3; 8:9. The *throne of grace* (Heb. 4:16) and the *throne of majesty* (Heb. 8:1) are likewise circumlocution for the name of God.⁴

III. **THE HOLY ONE ON THE THRONE.** John's use of symbolic language to describe what he saw is designed to communicate the awesome sense of splendor and strong sense of authority, sovereignty and glory that characterizes God. Beale writes, "The throne's universal sovereignty is highlighted by the fact that John places it in the center of his heavenly cosmology. The circular constructions around the throne symbolically enhance God's cosmic, universal kingship, a symbolic configuration attested elsewhere in the ancient world. All heavenly beings find significance only in their various placements around the central throne. And all earth's inhabitants are appraised on the basis of their attitude to God's claim to rule over them from this heavenly throne (cf. 6:16-17; 20:11-12)."⁵ Note the language that is used of the worship that is given to the One on the throne: "The elders preface their words of praise with acts of adoration. They prostrate themselves before the Lord and cast their crowns at his feet, acknowledging that all authority derives from him, belongs to him, and returns to him (Rev. 4:10). They then ascribe worthiness to God, the fact that he deserves their awe and adoration as they gladly confess his *glory and honor and power*. An unresolved question of worthiness, of deserved authority and rightful claim, will soon plunge John into deep grief amid this celestial joy (5:2-4). It is the crux of the two-movement throne scene that we are considering. Recognition of the supreme worthiness of God evokes a stabbing, sweet sense of awe, to which our modern hearts may be numbed by self-reliance and cynicism. (Before whom would we risk our dignity by flinging ourselves spontaneously facedown on the pavement?). The elders also support their assertion of God's worthiness with a rationale: *for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created* (4:11). The praises around the throne move from contemplation of who God is in himself, to his work of creation, and then on to the apex of worthiness, the work of redemption accomplished by the Lamb.⁶

IV. **THE ABSOLUTE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD.** This refers to God's separation and independence from His creation. Vos observed, "The doctrine of creation emphasizes the transcendence of God. That God has created the universe out of nothing is the most powerful expression of the fact that He is distinct from the universe, is exalted above the universe, and exists in Himself as the all-sufficient One. *He gives to all life, breath, and all things*. Therefore what the doctrine of the Trinity proclaims with respect to God's inner existence, the doctrine of creation proclaims to us outwardly."⁷ Moulton gives us this helpful analysis:

"Greek, like Sanskrit, puts the letter *a-* before many of its words to negative their meaning, as English puts *un-* or *in-*. (*Suttham, a-suttham* give the pattern in Indian languages). And so the NT uses word after word beginning with *a-* to emphasize the transcendence of God in what He is and what He does. He is wonderfully revealed to us in Jesus, and yet all the time we are to remember how much there is beyond our knowledge. Seventeen of these

negative words will be briefly examined in this chapter, though the picture with which they will leave us will not be negative, but very positive.

1. God is *invisible, unseen* (Rom. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:17). He is not to be thought of as material, however much we may be tempted to put Him in the categories that we understand. He is visible only to the spiritual eye of faith (Heb. 11:27), and preeminently in Jesus.
2. He is also *incorruptible*, not liable to the corruption of this earth, undying, eternal (Rom. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:17), and He bestows something of His nature upon us. He raises the dead incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:52). He gives us the incorruptible crown of life (1 Cor. 9:25). He has begotten us out of His own incorruptible nature (1 Pet. 1:23) for an incorruptible inheritance (1 Pet. 1:4).
3. This life of His he has shared especially with Jesus, our great High Priest, appointing Him *according to the power of an indissoluble life* (Heb. 7:16); that is to say, a life that cannot be broken up and destroyed but remains one and whole for ever.
4. The same emphasis on God's undying eternity is further made in another metaphor, this time from the realm of botany. The inheritance that He will give us is *unfading* (1 Pet. 1:4); we shall have an *unfading* wreath of glory from Him (1 Pet. 5:4). The coveted garland which was the prize for the victor in Greek races soon faded however valued it was. What God has to give us is something that will not fade throughout eternity. It will always be fresh and living.
5. God is also *immutable*, unchanging in His purposes and decisions (Heb. 6:17, 18). He is not like what we so often are: thinking one thing one day and another the next, altering our plans so that no one can depend on us. Hebrews uses the metaphor of a solemn oath, such as men intend to be final, to show that when God once makes a promise we can count on Him. He will never break it.
6. This thought is also expressed by another word in Rom. 11:29: *The gifts and the calling of God are unrepented of*. Sometimes we give away something and then later on we wish that we had not done so. God is not like that. He does not make mistakes in what He gives, and so He has no need to wish to change His mind after the gift has been made.
7. Another way in which His constancy is expressed is by the word in Heb. 12:28: *unshakeable*. All earthly power is so easily shaken. The whole history is the story of empires that last for a while and then topple over. But the kingdom that God gives to those who obey Him and are ready to serve Him is the unshakable kingdom of His own power.
8. This power is never power on the material level. The Jews relied too much on the material. Their temple, and the rite of circumcision, both central to their religion, were things made or done with hands. Jesus emphasizes that God's future temple will be *un-hand-made* (to give the Greek literally), not made with hands out of earthly material (Mk. 14:58). So also the heavenly body which will finally be ours will be *not made with hands* (2 Cor. 5:1); and the *circumcision of Christ*, the putting off of our earthly nature by a spiritual action not done with hands, supersedes the external Jewish act of circumcision (Col. 2:11). What is true of God's transcendence over us on the metaphysical level is equally true on the moral.
9. James 1:13 uses a remarkable word, about Him, saying that He is *untempted by evil*, or perhaps *inexperienced in evil*. We are far too experienced in it. Here is possibly the only sphere in which God is less experienced than we are.
10. The divine moral transcendence is carried yet further by the word *undefiled*, used of Jesus in Heb. 7:26, and of our prospective inheritance in 1 Pet. 1:4. Things and people on this earth are so easily polluted by the smuts of ubiquitous dirt or the stain of filthy sin. In Him there is no defilement. Everything is spotless and pure.

11. In the same verse in Hebrews (7:26) our great High Priest is also spoken of as *guileless*, the actual word being simply the negative of the word *bad*. The phrase *not bad* has unfortunately somewhat changed its meaning these days, but if we give it its full literal sense, it means that Jesus and His Father with Him are the very opposite of all that is evil, the very perfection of goodness, utterly beyond the goodness of mortal men in themselves, apart from the grace that comes from God alone.
12. From every angle we apply to God that common adjective *true*, and it is included in this list because by derivation the Greek word is a negative: *a-lēthēs, unconcealing*, that which does not hide reality, or deceive as men do. It is an adjective that is rarely applied to men in the NT. It is rightly reserved almost exclusively for God and for His Son – for examples see Jn. 3:33 and Mk. 12:14. Finally we come to four words by which St. Paul and St. Peter, with their sense of the greatness and majesty of God, attempt to say what they know cannot really be said.
13. There is the word translated *unsearchable* in Eph. 3:8 and *past tracing out* in Rom. 11:33. It is a metaphor from hunting. The trained shikari does not find it hard to track down an animal. Foot-marks, broken twigs, remains of the animal's prey, are all clear guides. God's ways, and His riches in Christ, are not so simply explored. They go way too deep.
14. God's judgment too are *unsearchable* (Rom. 11:33). The English translation is the same, but the metaphor is different. They cannot be fathomed by investigation such as a clever lawyer might undertake successfully. They are beyond our efforts to comprehend fully.
15. Even the gift of God's grace which He Himself puts within us is ultimately *indescribable* (2 Cor. 9:15). It goes beyond all our powers of speech.
16. And yet, despite this, we can rejoice with joy *unspeakable* (1 Pet. 1:8), with emotions that we cannot put into words. The grammatical form of all these words may be negative. There is nothing negative about what they give us. Here is a God far above our comprehension, far purer than our imperfection and sin, but not cut off from us. All the while He is ready to share with us as much as our poor capacity can receive. We have (17) an *unfailing* treasure laid up for us in the heavens (Lk. 12:33), and the unchanging, undefiled, unfailing God has us in His care and love."⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ W. D. Mueller, *Revelation: People's Bible Commentary* (Concordia Publishing House, 2005), p. 63.

² J. M. Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord* (P&R, 2020), p. 153.

³ *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis II*, ed. Moises Silva (Zondervan, 2014), p. 469.

⁴ D. Aune, *Revelation: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1997), p. 309.

⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: The New International Greek Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 320.

⁶ D. E. Johnson, *Triumph of The Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R, 2001), p. 103.

⁷ G. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume One, Theology Proper* (Lexham Press, 2012), p. 158.

⁸ I have adapted this section from H. K. Moulton, *The Challenge of The Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied In Depth* (Bagster & Sons LTD., 1977), pp. 20-23.