

When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation

Study Guide on Revelation 4-5—Week 4 (Sunday, Sept. 27)

Background: The first three chapters of Revelation show us John's first vision, in which he sees the exalted Christ among the seven lampstands. John is told to write what he sees and to transcribe the letters to the seven churches of the province of Asia. A new vision then begins that will comprise most of the rest of the book. John, in a prophetic trance, is given the privilege of looking through heaven's door into God's throne room. There he sees various unusual heavenly beings giving God praise for creating and sustaining the universe. Then various dramas begin to unfold, including the opening of seals, the sounding of trumpets, the pouring out of bowls, and others.

The reader must remember that John's glimpse into heaven is not to be taken literally. It is like other apocalyptic literature, in which highly symbolic imagery is used in order to make a powerful statement about the reality of God and his plans. John's original readers were well acquainted with this type of literature and knew better than to suppose, for example, that in heaven there are actually four creatures covered with eyes, each with six wings, one like a lion, one an ox, one a man, and one an eagle.

Text: These two chapters are filled with unusual landscapes, creatures, and other phenomena. Some are easy enough to understand, some more difficult. The primary points are that 1) God is majestic and very much in control of everything, and 2) only the Lamb, Jesus Christ, is worthy to unveil and carry out God's plan. The reader should avoid the temptation to overanalyze. It is the big picture that is most important, and concentration on details will detract from seeing the whole in its glory. For example, the jasper, carnelian, rainbow, lightning, thunder, and sea of glass are better simply experienced rather than dissected. It is not that these and other details have no interesting connections in the Old Testament or in the world of the first century. However, in a devotional study such as this those matters are less important.

Each reader is encouraged to read these texts carefully but in one sitting to let the drama have its effect.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think the vision of the throne room of God might have encouraged those persecuted by the emperor who sat in the throne room of Rome? What message do you think John was trying to get across to his original readers? What was John saying about unseen reality?
2. God is shown to be sovereign, worshipped by every creature in the universe. What powers or characteristics do you think are represented by the lion, the ox, the man, and the eagle?

3. The twenty-four elders who bow before God are most often seen as representing the twelve tribes of Israel plus the twelve apostles of Jesus (see Rev. 21:12, 14). Assuming this is correct and that these elders do represent faithful human beings, what role do they play, and what message is John sending to his readers?

4. The sealed scroll that no one is worthy to open creates dramatic tension, especially when John begins to weep. How is this tension resolved, and how does this little drama function for the reader (i.e., what might we be moved to think, feel, or believe as we read this)?

5. Who might we expect to open the scroll, since he is described as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David? Who actually emerges to fill this role? What made this figure worthy to open the scroll?

6. What do the golden bowls full of incense held by the elders represent? What does this tell us?

7. There are wonderful hymns in the worship of the different beings in these chapters, many of which have been used in the songs we sing. What are some of these? What does this scene suggest about the nature of worship?