

Revelation 4

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[0 : 01] Have you ever been on a guided tour? You must have been. Everybody's been on a guided tour, probably on many occasions. Maybe as children we were dragged along unwillingly on guided tours of one kind or another. The last time I was on a guided tour was on an open-top bus in Dublin in January, and it was freezing. But the guide, who was also the driver, was good fun, and it was informative and enjoyable despite the cold. I wonder, would you like to go on a guided tour of heaven? Well, that's the plan for this morning. We won't complete the tour. I'd hope that we would complete the tour this morning, but we won't complete the tour, but we'll certainly do, I hope, a good part of the tour. Let's turn to the chapter that we read there, chapter 4 in the book of Revelation. And what is John doing at the start of the chapter? What are we told? Well, we're told that he was looking. After this I looked. And what does he see? As he looks, what does he see? Well, he sees an open door. An open door. Not just any open door, but an open door to heaven. After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. I wonder what John felt when he saw that open door in his vision. Excitement, trepidation, fear. Did he have time to think to himself, well, shall I have a peek? Shall I take a few steps closer? Shall I lean my head through the door and have a look at what's beyond the door? But then he hears a voice, and the voice invites him to come closer, to come on through and have a look. And who does the voice belong to? Well,

John tells us who the voice belongs to. He tells us that it was, and in the words of the passage, the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet. Now, if we only had this chapter, we would be left somewhat puzzled. Well, who is that? Who is the one who has this voice that had spoken to John like a trumpet? Well, we can identify who the voice belongs to when we turn back to chapter 1 and verses 10 and 12, John's vision of Christ. In chapter 1, verse 10, we read, On the Lord's day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, the same voice that he now hears. And then we jump to verse 12, I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands. And among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, and it goes on, and we have this vision of the risen, exalted, ascended Christ. So, this voice belongs to Jesus. Jesus is the one who is calling John to come closer.

How amazing is that? Jesus is going to be the guide. John is going to be given a tour of heaven, and Jesus is going to be the guide. If I were to get a tour of heaven, I want Jesus to be my guide.

Well, the great thing is that we can join this tour. We can join this tour with Jesus as our guide. As he guides John, so he guides us. So, let's tiptoe behind John and Jesus and listen and look.

And every so often we will pause and reflect on what we are hearing and seeing. You see, the vision, this tour of heaven is not intended solely to excite and thrill, to satisfy our curiosity, but it is intended to challenge and to comfort and to instruct. What we see and hear must change us and our worship and service to God here on earth. We pray. The Lord's prayer, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. How can we pray that prayer if we know nothing of what goes on in heaven? And so, as we witness what goes on in heaven, that will inform us as we pray, but will also instruct us as to the manner in which we can live so that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. But what does Jesus say that He is going to show John? Well, again, we turn to the passage and we read that Jesus told John this, I will show you what must take place after this.

[5 : 24] Now, these words, this time reference, what will take place after this, they don't only refer to what we will be seeing and hearing in chapter 4, but to all the visions that follow throughout the book of Revelation. And the time reference after this, I think, is clear enough. Jesus is saying that what we will see is world history from John's present into the future, or all that will happen in the last days, to use the language of the New Testament, where the last days are understood as the age that began with Jesus' first coming and ends with His return in glory. All of that span of world history will be seen from heaven's perspective in the visions that follow. But it all begins with a tour of heaven. Why so? Why does it begin with a tour of heaven? Well, for a very good reason. Jesus is going to show John who is in charge of history. And so, when the following visions will come one after another, and we observe and witness all that has taken place and is taking place and will take place, we do so in the light of this core, fundamental reality that God is seated on the throne in heaven. And so there, the vision must begin.

Jesus is going to show John who is in charge, who is the one who is determined and will govern all that must take place. And it must take place because He has so determined the one seated on the throne. So, what does John see in heaven? Well, what he sees above all else, what is central to what he witnesses in this vision, is a throne. That's what he sees. He sees a throne. And the book of Revelation is dominated by this throne is dominated by this throne in heaven. Somebody has taken the time to count the occasions when the word throne is employed in the New Testament. And seemingly, I haven't done the count myself, but seemingly it is employed on 62 occasions. And 47 of those occurrences are found in the book of Revelation. The throne dominates the vision. It's all about the throne. So, let's ask some questions about the throne that are answered in the vision, that are part of the tour, as it were, of heaven. And the first question that we pose is maybe the most obvious one. Who is on the throne? Who is seated on the throne? Well, the identity of the one seated on the throne is revealed to us very clearly by the words of worship of those who bow before the throne.

So, in verse 8, we have the living creatures, and they worship the one seated on the throne in these terms. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come. And so, very clearly, we have identified for us the one who is seated on the throne, the Lord God Almighty.

The 24 elders join in that praise. In verse 11, you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory, glory, and honor, and power, and they go on. It is God, the creator of the universe, who is seated on the throne, the Lord God Almighty, the God who has made Himself known in the person of the throne. Just pause and let that sink in. God reigns. God is in control in heaven and from heaven, now and always. He reigns over the affairs of nations and empires, and over and in the tiniest details of your life and circumstances. And we'll come back to this further to pause and reflect on it in a moment, but just a little bit further on. Who is on the throne?

Well, God is on the throne. Where is the throne? In the vision that John is given, where is the throne? What's the location of the throne? Well, the location of the throne is in the very center of all that John witnesses. Now, the interesting thing is that we're not told that explicitly. At no point in the chapter does it say the throne was located in the center of heaven. We're not told that. But what we are told, tellingly, is that the position of everything else is relative to the throne. If we go through the passage, we'll see that everything else that is spoken of is spoken of in the sense of where it is relative to the throne. So, you have the elders who encircle the throne. You have that which surrounds the throne. You have the sea that is in front of the throne. You have the living creatures who are around the throne. All of the language points to the throne as being at the very center of heaven.

[11:10] Indeed, everything else only has significance in its relation to the throne. The throne and the one occupying the throne are at the center of heaven. Now, here we need to just pause and reflect, and very especially if we want to take seriously the words of the Lord's Prayer, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. You see, the center is God's place not only in heaven, but on earth and in your life. Does He occupy that central place in your life? Does your life have significance only in relation to God, in relation to where you stand vis-à-vis God? Is God's throne, His rule and person at the center of your life, of your family, of your relationships, of your plans and ambitions? Or have you relegated God to the sidelines? Is God in a pretty religious box that you open on a Sunday and you take Him out for a walk only to be put back in His place and out of your way for the rest of the week? You see, if that's the way in which you deal with God, then He is not occupying the place that He occupies in heaven. You see, in heaven He is on the throne in the center, and everybody is described in relation to God at the center, seated on the throne.

Does God occupy that central place in the life and worship of our congregation? Where is the throne? The throne is at the center. What does the one seated on the throne look like?

John is very guarded, or perhaps more accurately, the vision he is given is not intended to provide a visual representation of God. Rather, the language is intended to reveal something of His glory and majesty and power and holiness. Now, in verse 3, we do find the language of appearance. Let's just read what it says there. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. What's going on?

What's the idea? What do these precious stones represent? God doesn't look like precious stones. God is a spirit. But precious stones in a vision serve to represent God's splendor and majesty and glory.

And there's also possibly the idea that the precious stones serve to intensify the divine light emanating from the throne by reflecting that unapproachable light and producing a heavenly show of lights.

[14:12] We can maybe try and just imagine that all these precious stones and all their manner in which they're formed, how they reflect that light, producing this spectacular display that communicates something of God's glory and majesty and splendor and beauty.

Let me pose another question. In many ways, really at the heart of the matter. What is the one seated on the throne who we've already identified? What is He doing? What's He doing? Well, what do kings on thrones do? Well, any king worth his salt, any queen worth her salt, they reign. He reigns in heaven and over earth now. Now, we've made this point already by simply identifying that there is this throne, but I want to reflect a little more on the manner of God's reign. Is He really in charge? We are part of a kingdom, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We have a monarch who on occasion sits on a throne. Perhaps we'd be in less of a mess if she was, but that's by the by. But is this what it's like with God? He sits on a pretty throne in heaven, but the real decision-making takes place down here. Is that the reality? Well, not for a moment. We can draw from the vision insights into what God's reign involves, how He exercises His rule. And God exercises His rule by issuing judgments and commands, by commissioning His servants.

In verse 5, we're told what issues from the throne. I think that verb, issues, is significant. We read there in verse 5, though the verb doesn't appear in this translation, from the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. What has been spoken of here comes from the throne, from the throne. So, how do we understand that? What does the thunder represent that's coming from the throne? This is language that echoes, and in all probability deliberately, scenes that we encounter at Mount Sinai, when God from His throne in heaven spoke and commanded. We can just remind ourselves of that as we turn to Exodus chapter 19 and read from verse 16. Exodus chapter 19 and verse 16, we read, on the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. You can see that the echoes in the language, the equivalences in vocabulary. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and the voice of God answered him. The lightning, the peals of thunder, they represent the voice of God. And what is God doing?

Well, he's on the throne, and he is exercising judgment. He is issuing his decrees. He is delivering his commands. He is commissioning his servants as a king ought to do. God is no symbolic monarch, no absent landlord. God actively and permanently and absolutely reigns from his throne in heaven.

And who does he commission to do his bidding and ensure that his judgments and decrees are enacted? Well, again, we turn to the vision. We read there in verse 9, just following on from the reference, sorry, in verse 5, following on from the references to lightning and thunder, we read, in front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God, or as the footnote at the bottom of the page suggests as an alternative way of understanding that language, the sevenfold spirit. And we've met with the sevenfold spirit already in Revelation. And we've discovered then that it identifies the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Who enacts God's decrees?

[19:19] God does in the person of the Holy Spirit. Now we'll see later on in the vision, not this morning, that God has others that he can and does commission. Let's just pause and reflect for a moment on the reality and the everyday practical reality of God's reign. God really is in control. Is he in control?

Of Brexit. Without a doubt. Is he responsible for all the chaos and mess? By no means. That's our fault. But is he in control? He is in control. He is ordering all things for the good of his people and the furtherance of his good and gracious purposes. It's not for me to interpret providence, but could the chaos be a sign of judgment? I don't know. I don't know. But it's possible.

One thing I do know is that he is in control. And so when you see what you see on the news, prime ministers coming and going and others vying for position, when you see plans being presented and then falling to pieces, when you see the chaos that is so characteristic of all this episode, be assured that God is in control. When we see on our streets and here in our classrooms how good is ridiculed and evil is celebrated, when we witness how lies are dressed as truth and truth is trodden underfoot, is God in control? Without a doubt. Why doesn't he act? Why doesn't he do something about it?

Well, who says he isn't acting? The fact that we don't see it, the fact that you don't see it, doesn't mean that he is passive. Can we always see what God is doing? Can we always hear the peals of thunder issuing from his throne? No, we don't hear all that he says and all that he commands.

We don't see or discern all that he is doing. But we know that he is on the throne and that he is in control. Is he in control of your life? Is he in control when your relationships disintegrate and your boss is a pain and your car breaks down and your body is in meltdown and your checks bounce and the questions you're expecting. And the questions you were expecting in the exam don't come up.

[21 : 58] And well, you can add to the list. We could go on and on and on and on. Is he in control? Yes, he is. He's seated on the throne and he is in control.

What I would urge you is that every day as you begin the day, lift up your eyes to heaven and see God sitting on the throne and launch into the day with all its possible frustrations and disappointments and pain, whispering these words, my God reigns. My God reigns. Will you do that?

Will you begin your day acknowledging what this vision declares to us, that God is seated on His throne?

What encircles the throne? In verse 3, we're told of that which encircles the throne. And the one who sat there at the appearance of jasper and ruby, a rainbow that shone like an emerald, encircled the throne.

What does the rainbow represent? Well, there were lots of rainbows being paraded in our city yesterday. That's not what this rainbow represents. This rainbow does not serve to glorify and celebrate sin, but beautifully serves to announce the timeless grace and mercy and faithfulness of God to sinners.

[23 : 34] This rainbow reminds us of the story of Noah. And let's just remind ourselves of that story or part of that story and the critical place that the rainbow plays in that account. We turn to Genesis 9. We read from verse 12.

And I'm sure many of you will be familiar with this already, but let's just turn to the source itself and listen to what it says. In Genesis 9 and verse 12, following the flood, we read, And God said, This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come. I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.

Whenever the rainbow appears in the cloud, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on earth. And so the rainbow, the rainbow that encircles the throne is a permanent reminder to God of His gracious and merciful promises to His people. Let's just pause for a moment and reflect on that. You know, when we think of the rainbow, even when we think of it informed by the story of Noah, when we think of the rainbow, we often see it as a reminder to us that God is faithful.

And that's not a bad thing. For myself, every time I see a rainbow, I am reminded, and I'm grateful for the reminder. I see the rainbow, and I think, God is faithful. That's good. It's good that the rainbow serves that purpose for me, and it encourages me, and it strengthens me in my faith to be reminded, have that visual reminder of God's faithfulness. But what does the text actually say concerning the purpose of the rainbow? Who is to be reminded by the rainbow? Well, let's see what it says. We read it, but let's just read it again in Genesis chapter 9, and in verse 16, or rather in verse 18, we have this answer, the answer to our question. Whenever the rainbow appears in the cloud, and this is God speaking, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant. Isn't that a striking thing? God isn't saying that the rainbow is principally for you. It's for me. It's a reminder to me of my promises and of my faithfulness. Every time I see it, I will remember my promises to my people. And what about the rainbow in heaven that permanently encircles the throne? Well, as God thunders His judgments, and some of them are severe judgments, as He thunders His judgments, He does so encircled by a rainbow that reminds Him of His promises to His own blood-bought people. Every judgment, every decree, every providence is issued under the rainbow, under the rainbow that encircles the throne.

And so I say, take heart, believer. There is a rainbow in heaven that encircles the throne. But what more do we see in this tour of heaven? Well, we're also told what's in front of the throne.

[27 : 28] Notice there in verse 6, also in front of the throne. Again, you see everything in relation to the throne. In front of the throne, there was also what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

What do we make of this sea of glass, clear as crystal? It's a vision. It's truth being communicated by the medium of a vision. But what does it mean? What does it represent? What truth is it declaring? Now there is much debate as to what the sea here represents. And I don't pretend to hold the definitive interpretation, but it is certainly the case that in the Bible, the sea is often used as a symbol of chaos. The sea represents chaos. It represents danger. The storms that mark the sea represent chaos and danger and death. But here in heaven, the sea is calm.

In front of the throne, there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. Here, the sea is calm. The forces of chaos and death have been tamed. Of course, Jesus anticipated this or reflected heaven's rule when he calmed the storm.

He issued the storm. He issued the storm. He issued the storm. He issued the storm. He issued the word and the storm was calmed. And there we have a highlight, an anticipation of this great reality that is represented in heaven. Of the chaos being calmed. Of the forces of evil being tamed by the one who is seated on the throne.

And so let's just, as we draw things to a close in this partial to it of heaven, let's just pause and reflect on that. We live in a world where evil, where violence, where injustice, where oppression are rampant.

[29 : 34] And evil has its victims. We are the perpetrators often of evil. But we are also often the victims of evil. But it will not always be so.

The sea before the throne. The sea before the throne, calm and still, assures us of God's ultimate victory over evil and death. A victory, of course, that we know has been secured by His Son, our Savior, Jesus, who died on the cross, bearing the sin of the world and conquering death and the grave.

Well, next week we'll continue the tour and discover who else inhabits heaven as John is given this vision and it's recorded for us in this chapter.

But for the moment, we want to just make use of these other characters who we will consider more carefully next week. The elders and the living creatures. We want to make use of them to help us in one simple way.

So, by answering this question, how are we to respond to this vision of heaven and the one seated on the throne? Well, we are to respond in worship. That's what the living creatures do. That's what the 24 elders do.

[31 : 05] That is the business of heaven, to worship the one seated on the throne. And it's our business too. That is how we must respond. It's the only reasonable response to all that we have witnessed as we've been given this guided tour by Jesus of heaven.

The only response, the only fitting response, the only rational response is to bow down in worship. Let us pray.

We thank you that you are the God who is seated on the throne in heaven. That you reign supreme over all. We thank you that you rule with justice and equity and righteousness.

And that your rule is governed by your grace and mercy and kindness. We thank you that your throne is encircled by a rainbow.

We thank you that you are the God who is stilled and is stilling and will ultimately still all the forces of evil and wickedness and injustice in our world.

[32 : 40] We thank you that you are our God and that our God reigns. Amen.