

True Sightings

The First Hymns of Heaven – Part II

Revelation 4:4-11

Introduction

Louis XIV was an avid persecutor of the Protestant Reformation in seventeenth century France. Under his reign, the believers, known as the Huguenots, were bankrupted, if not killed, along with any Protestant pastor living in the country.

I found it interesting that this king, although he ruled longer than any other European monarch – just over seventy years – actually decreed that the word “death” never be spoken in his court or in his presence.ⁱ

The attitude of most people toward life after death corresponds to whether or not they believe they have much hope after death.

Since the fall of man in the garden of Eden, mankind has been infected with a terminal condition called mortality. The last time any of us checked, ten people out of ten, die.

Whether or not we pass a law that no one can ever say the word “death” in our presence, we cannot get around it. As strange as it might sound, death is a fact of life!

And, by the way, worldwide statistics reveal that three people die every second. That is 180 people every minute. By the time we finish our worship service today, 13,000 people will die, somewhere in the world.

This then means, staggering though it is to consider, that every day, more than 250,000 people experience life after death.ⁱⁱ

According to the biblical record, these people have either gone to heaven (II Corinthians 5:8) or they have gone to Hades where they await their final judgment and the eternal lake of fire we refer to as hell (Revelation 20:15).

For the believer, there is the assurance of our hope, fixed as an anchor in Christ. The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus Christ,

... through [His] death . . . destroyed the power of death . . .

and delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

(Hebrews 2:14-15)

We, as believers, do not fear death. Certainly, we have anxious thoughts about the unknown and the passage of death – which is the reason we cling to the scriptures.

David talked about,

... walking through the valley of the shadow of death . . . (Psalm 23:4a)

We do not pitch a tent there – we walk through it.

And, it is a shadow of death. We cannot have a shadow unless there is a source of light.

Furthermore, no one has ever been hurt by a shadow – shadows cannot hold us; cannot hurt us – even the shadow of death.

This is why David can say,

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . .

Why? Because,

... You are with me . . .

In other words, “My Shepherd; my Source of Light is actually walking through it with me.”

Those who die are not far from God – they have never been closer – they have never been more secure.

So then, regarding those who have died, we do not lose them – we certainly are at a loss without them, but we do not lose them – we lose *contact* with them – temporarily.

Now, because of the fact that they have passed on and since we all know intuitively that there is life after death, as we talked about in our last session, and because we are curious people and really want to know more about where they are, our curiosity has opened the door to a lot of interesting viewpoints and even opened the opportunity for charlatans to peddle their books and tapes about their own experiences they supposedly had and the things they supposedly saw in heaven.

I read of one man’s trip to heaven who was transported there for five days. He said he saw Jesus,

who happened to be in the middle of supervising the construction of mansions.

Somehow Christ created the universe and the animal kingdom, along with Adam and Eve, in six days, but He has not been able to finish building our homes over the past 2,000 years – He is still working on them.

No, the Bible says Christ ascended and was seated (Hebrews 10:12). He did not ascend to put on bib overalls and get out a hammer and nails.

John will see the city in his tour of heaven, recorded nearly 2,000 years ago in this book of the revelation, and the heavenly city is already finished. We will not hear John speak of scaffolding anywhere; Jesus is not going over blueprints.

This individual also claimed, and I quote, “everything God created upon the earth is in heaven – horses, cats and dogs.”

This was the point where I knew without a doubt that he was deceiving his audience. I can understand horses and dogs in heaven, but cats? That cannot be right.

Another man toured heaven and has been on all the Christian talk shows and touted in *Charisma Magazine* and other charismatic publications. He claimed to have been taken personally by Christ on a tour of heaven and was specifically taken through a gigantic building.

Inside this building, he saw stocked on one side, as in a warehouse, arms, fingers, legs, and all sorts of body parts. There were shelves filled with neat little packages of eyes – green eyes, brown eyes, blue eyes. This building, he explained, contained all the parts of the human body that people on earth need. Jesus said to me, “These are the unclaimed blessings. This building should not be full. It should be emptied every single day. You should come in here with faith and get the needed body parts for you and the people you [pray for].”

This man was even shown a medicine cabinet in heaven stocked with pill bottles labeled “Peace” and “Overdose of the Holy Ghost”.

He talked about riding the Holy Ghost elevator and wading into the River of Life where he and Jesus had a water fight.

Yet another celebrated author talked of being given a tour of heaven where the Lord took him to the Record Room where every idle word was recorded and for which every believer will be judged – only afterward to see all their idle words emptied into the Sea of Forgetfulness. He was taken to a

Garment Room where he saw angels sewing our robes.

Let me tell of one more. A man quoted on Christian television talk shows explained that he was taken to heaven in a near death experience. He explained that the primary nerve in God’s cranium is the sense of smell. He learned that the sacrificial system was designed to satisfy God’s cranial nerve. All the while, the talk show host was saying, “This is wonderful . . . this is meaty.”

This man went on to say that he picked some flowers and noticed there was no water in their stems because Jesus is the living water.ⁱⁱⁱ

These are just a few, not to mention other more recent versions of people who have gone to heaven and everything focused on themselves. Everyone was exactly as they remembered – even grandparents had not changed – they looked exactly as they remembered them.

I hope not!

Why does this stuff sell? Why do people buy it?

Because we know there is something out there. And we, as Christians, know it is heaven and we are curious about our future home.

There is nothing wrong with that!

Dr. Charles Ryle, a great expositor and English pastor from the 1800s, wrote these words,

The man who is about to sail for Australia as a settler is naturally anxious to know something about his future home, its climate, its employments, its inhabitants, its ways and its customs. All these are subjects of deep interest to him. You are leaving the land of your nativity; you are going to spend the rest of your life in a new hemisphere. It would be strange indeed if you did not desire information about your new abode. So before we go to our eternal home we should try to become acquainted with it.^{iv}

Fortunately we have been given a wealth of information – most often neglected – in the revelation of John. Let us discover six sightings of heaven that are authentic, true, realities of the throne of God.

True Sightings of Heaven

Let us pick up our study in Revelation chapter 4, beginning at verse 1, to refresh our memories, and reading through verse 4.

Remember this begins after the church age ends and is raptured to heaven. The church on earth was

the focus in chapters 1 through 3, but now the scene shifts. God is not speaking to the church on earth; the church is about to sing to God in heaven – throughout chapters 4 and 5. So we could interpret the first phrase in Revelation 4:1, “After the scene shifts from earth to heaven”.

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! 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.”

At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.

So John is taken in spirit and given a tour of heaven. Continue and notice verses 3 through 4.

And he who sat there had the appearance of a jasper [stone] and carnelian [sardius stone], and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.

Around the throne [of God] were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.

1. The first of John’s six sightings was the glory of God upon His throne.

This was a dazzling light show that we studied in our last session. John will describe more of God’s throne in detail a little later.

2. The second sighting of John, in verse 4, is the presence of twenty-four thrones upon which sat twenty-four elders.

As we attempt to identify who these twenty-four elders are, it is helpful to know that the number twenty-four is used in scripture as a representative number – a number that represents a host of people.

For instance, there were twenty-four officers of the sanctuary representing the twenty-four divisions of the Old Testament priests – a number that represented several thousand priests. There were also twenty-four divisions of singers in the temple – representing several mass choirs (I Chronicles 25).

- This has led some to believe that these twenty-four elders represent Israel.

The major challenge with this view is that Israel is about to undergo national judgment and salvation which comes during the tribulation – throughout Revelation chapters 6-19.

These elders are victorious, crowned men and the events are yet to take place in which Israel is to be redeemed. Israel is yet to be rewarded.^v

- Others believe that these twenty-four represent two groups of representatives – the twelve apostles and the twelve sons of Israel.

It makes for nice mathematics, but this group appears, not as a combination of two groups, but as a unified group of the same makeup.

Furthermore, if they were the twelve apostles, John would have seen himself on one of the thrones, yet he writes of this sighting with a detached view.

- Some believe that these elders represent believers who are martyred during the tribulation; that these are tribulation saints.

The problem with this view is that when the tribulation saints do appear in chapter 7, the elders are already present.

Maybe you are thinking, “What does it matter who they are?”

It matters, as you will see, so just be patient. You sat through six years of Romans – you can wait ten minutes for this.

- Others say they are angels seated near the throne of God, designed to worship Him.

This is actually an attractive perspective, and one that is not out of context with this sighting of heaven.

One of the problems, however, is that angels are never called elders or “presbuteroi”. This is the term for the leader in the New Testament church, which is translated “elders”.

Paul wrote to Timothy saying,

Let the elders [the “presbuteroi”] who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (I Timothy 5:17)

This was a term in the New Testament for church leadership. Here in heaven’s court, there are twenty-four “presbuteroi” sitting upon their thrones.

By the way, the word “presbuteroi (πρεσβυτεροι)” gives us our English transliterated word, “Presbyterian”.

This reminds me of the little girl who came home from her Presbyterian church one Sunday afternoon. On the way home, her mother asked her what she learned in Sunday school. She said, “We studied Revelation and found out that only twenty-four Presbyterians made it to heaven.” That is just a joke

– we all know there will not be that many Presbyterians in heaven.^{vi}

I suppose you could point out that there is no mention of Baptists anywhere – so at least twenty-four Presbyterians made it. The Baptists are probably having a potluck nearby.

Now having offended both Presbyterians and Baptists, let us continue?!

Another difficulty of believing these elders are angels is that angels are never shown wearing “stephanos (στεφανος)” – a victor’s crown.

A “stephanos,” in the ancient Olympic Games, was a crown given to the champion as a bestowal of honor to him and to his god.

In fact, the victor’s hometown would hold a celebration upon his return and at this festival, the victorious athlete would present his crown in the temple to his patron god.^{vii}

This only adds to my belief that these elders represent the church – the church, raptured prior to the tribulation, now praising God in the court of heaven and before the throne of God.

Notice their lyrics in Revelation 4:11, as they sing,

Worthy are you, our Lord and God . . .

This is personal, possessive worship.

The promise of Christ to the church has come true. He promised the church in His letters that they would be robed in white garments (Revelation 3:5 and 3:18); that they would be rewarded with crowns “στεπηνουζ” upon their heads (Revelation 3:11); that they would be seated on thrones – a picture of the victorious church promised in Revelation 3:21 and seen again in Revelation 20:4a, which reads,

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. . . .

The apostle Paul left no doubt who this would be when he wrote,

. . . do you not know that the saints will judge the world? . . . (I Corinthians 6:2a)

These twenty-four are not angels; not the twelve apostles and the twelve sons of Israel; not the tribulation saints. Due to their garments and their crowns and the thrones, which are specifically promised during the church age to the redeemed, and due to their personal worship of their Lord and God, these represent the company of the redeemed – you

and me – worshipping the Lord following the rapture of the church.

3. Now John shifts his focus back to this amazing throne and makes note of a third sighting, which is phenomena surrounding the throne of God.

Notice Revelation 4:5a.

From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder . . .

The phrase “from the throne” or “ek tou thronou (εκ του θρονου),” literally informs us that these peals of thunder and flashes of lightning and the sounds of rumblings are actually proceeding from God Himself.^{viii}

These are the sights and sounds of judgment, not grace. At this moment, these sounds resemble the sights and sounds, where, at Mount Sinai, God gave the Law to Moses, and Moses recorded that the mountain was covered by dark clouds and flashes of lightning and the whole earth shook with thundering rumbles.^{ix}

At the end of human history, God’s throne becomes a weapon of war.

We cannot imagine the terror of this sovereign throne as God’s wrath is about to be unleashed upon the earth.

Do not miss the fact that the redeemed are singing – they are not terrified of His wrath for they have been rescued by faith in Christ.

So while the whole earth experiences the wrath of God in utter terror, the unbelievers are,

calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” (Revelation 6:16)

At the same time, the church will be in heaven, secure in their place and position, with their reward and white robes, exulting in their worship of sovereign God.

4. John makes note of a fourth sighting, which is that of the Holy Spirit.

Notice Revelation 4:5b.

. . . and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God,

This is another reference to the Holy Spirit, mentioned in Revelation 1:4.

Seven is the number of perfection or completion. This is a reference to the seven-fold ministry of the

Holy Spirit we have studied in the past. Isaiah references this seven-fold ministry of wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, reverence, and deity (Isaiah 11:2).^x

The Spirit of God is to,

. . . convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8)

Imagine the terror of this hour of testing – and of the final judgment day at the great white throne of Revelation 20 – when the omniscient Holy Spirit serves as prosecuting Attorney. He knows every thought, word, and deed of every man, woman, and young person.

I have talked to people who talk of standing before God as no big thing.

My blood chills to read in Winston Churchill's biography that when he was once asked if he was ready to meet God, he responded, "I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter."

There is no human bravado before this almighty Judge.

The Spirit of God knows every time, every place, every thought, every act, every motive, every deed, every result, and every lasting influence of every sin for which the world of unbelievers will be judged.^{xi}

These are crimes against an eternal God which will bring eternal judgment!

In this heavenly sighting, the Spirit of Perfection is pictured, not as the inspiring tongue of fire, or the warmth of an illuminating candle, or the soft flutter of a dove. He is now the burning torch of fire – a symbol of war in Judges 7 and Nahum 2. He is ready to make war on sinful earth.

5. John makes a fifth observation, in this genuine tour of heaven, of the sea of glass.

Notice Revelation 4:6.

and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

This is another one of the places where vocabulary fails the apostle John in trying to describe the shimmering floor of this awesome courtroom. He simply says it shone brilliantly like crystal. Reflecting all the sights around the throne – the glory of God, the emerald rainbow, the golden thrones, the white robes, the fiery torches of the Spirit's flames – it looked like an expansive, vast sea of glass.

One author provoked my thinking when he reminded his readers that a good architect will often put a fountain or a pool of water in front of a building

which immediately doubles the beauty of it by reflecting it during the day, and during the night time will again double the light that comes from it.^{xii}

Imagine the added splendor now, of everything being seen doubled, and more by way of reflection. It was an overwhelming sight and it leads the hosts of heaven to sing!

This sight provoked songs. We are given our first taste of five hymns in heaven. They are heard by John for the first time and sung by the church in heaven for the first time.

John has now seen:

- the glory of God;
- the twenty-four elders, representing the redeemed and raptured church;
- lightning flashing, while surrounded by the crashing brilliance of thunder rumbling;
- the burning torches of the Spirit of God;
- all reflected in the pavement of this palace court that looks like a sea of glass.

6. Now notice John's next sighting of strange angelic creatures.

Note the middle part of Revelation 4:6.

. . . And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind:

If you want to read of Ezekiel's vision of these cherubim, they are described in chapter 1. This is similar to John's vision, yet different; similar to Isaiah's vision of seraphim in Isaiah 6, yet different.

More than likely, these are cherubim who can change their appearance at will – just as we observe angels taking on human appearances in the New Testament.

The cherubim are among the highest order of angelic beings.

Most people picture cherubs as naked babies who fly around on tiny wings, shooting people with arrows that make them fall in love. That may be good for Hallmark, but it is not true of heaven.

The cherub or cherubim (plural) are majestic, awe-inspiring creatures.

- It was the cherubim with their swords of fire that made sure Adam and Eve could not return to the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24).
- The angelic forms of cherubim were sculpted out of solid gold with their wings touching

over the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle (Exodus 26:31).

- With golden thread, the forms of the cherubim were woven into the veil of the Holy of Holies (Exodus 26:1).
- Figures of cherubim were engraved on the walls of Solomon's majestic temple (I Kings 6:29).
- They stand ready for God's personal orders, coming and going as a flash of lightning (Ezekiel 1:14).

Their power of perception and alert diligence is described as being covered with eyes so that no matter where they were they saw clearly.

They are difficult to imagine, are they not?

The trouble I have with everyone else's vision of heaven that they write books about and get interviewed about on TV, as opposed to John's vision and Ezekiel's vision, is that I can understand everyone else's vision. However, the true sightings of the glory of God and the creatures of heaven leave John at a loss for words and cause the stretching of our imaginations.

Let us add to the mystery of these angelic creatures. Notice Revelation 4:7-8.

the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight.

And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes all around and within . . .

Imagine this strange scene. All John can say is, "They looked like this . . . and they looked like that..."

I have uncovered more views on these creatures than you want to hear – including the view that they represent the four Gospels or the four points of the Zodiac.

What we do know is that they are exalted angelic beings. Though distinguished later on from other angels, it can be explained by their exalted state – we know there is a created hierarchy of angels, with Lucifer once holding the highest position among them all (Isaiah 14).

We also know that these creatures are deeply involved in announcing the coming judgments of the tribulation. In fact, they will call the four horsemen into action (Revelation 6:1, 3, 5, 7).

They are the ones who announce the verdict of God's judgment. In fact, in Revelation chapter 15, they will give the seven angels their bowls to pour out on planet earth.

Why they look like they do we do not know for certain, although most evangelical scholars believe they represent animate creation. The:

- lion represents wild creatures;
- ox or calf represents domestic animals;
- man represents the pinnacle of God's creation;
- eagle represents flying creatures.

Others see in these four a representation of God's attributes. The:

- nobility and majesty of the lion;
- servant strength of the ox;
- reason and will of mankind;
- soaring swiftness of the eagle.

Whatever they are, John hears what these creatures say, in Revelation 4:8b.

. . . and day and night they do not cease to say,

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”*

This hymn provokes a hymn from the redeemed. Notice Revelation 4:9-10.

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever,

the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne . . .

The church has been rewarded as promised, just as Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, and in this verse, we see the church casting their crowns at His feet – for our good works were really His work through us and He deserves all the credit, praise and glory. And the first words in this hymn of the redeemed are,

*Worthy are you, our Lord . . .
(Revelation 4:11a)*

“Worthy” or “axios (αξιως)” was the word used of the Roman emperor when he marched back to the

capital city in a triumphal procession. People would cheer and songs would be sung of his worthiness.^{xiii}

The church has been led to heaven in a triumphal procession and we also sing and shout, “You, our Emperor and Lord, are worthy.”

Why?

There are two reasons sung of in this hymn.

1. Because of who You are!

Notice Revelation 4:11a.

Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, . . .

He is worthy, not only because of who He is, but for a second reason.

2. Because of what You have done!

Continue to Revelation 4:11b.

. . . for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

- The glory of God is indescribable.
- The throne-room setting of God is unimaginable.
- The security and joy of the church is forever unchangeable.

Conclusion

Steven Lawson, in his book on heaven, recounts the story of a pastor friend who was traveling abroad. While traveling, he was given a guided tour of a large Buddhist temple. As he walked through the religious shrine, he noticed the luxurious furnishings, the lavish fixtures, the costly materials that had all gone into making this ornate temple. It was more opulent than any house of worship he had ever seen before. He was overwhelmed.

Turning to his tour guide, the pastor asked, “Do you mind if I ask you a question? How much did it cost to build this temple?”

As if insulted, the Buddhist tour guide stopped in his tracks and replied, “Cost? What cost? We don’t think of cost when it comes to Buddha.” Then, leaning closer to the pastor, this Buddhist follower said, “Sir, you must understand, there is nothing too good for the Buddha.”

What an indictment on casual Christianity.^{xiv}

We know the truth and we serve, not a dead man whose bones are dust in a coffin, but the living sovereign Lord whose throne flashes light and sounds forth thunder; where creatures encircle Him and sing

His praises – and where we, the redeemed, sing that He is worthy of all glory and honor and praise.

I like that old gospel song that puts our living Lord above all others in this way:

It won’t be old Buddha who’s sittin’ on the throne;

And it won’t be old Mohammed that’s calling us home;

It won’t be Hare Krishna who plays that trumpet tune,

Cause we’re going to see the Son, not Reverend Moon.

Amen?

Ladies and gentlemen, in light of this scene, which is in our future; in light of these six sightings of John the apostle, there is:

- no sacrifice too great to offer Him;
- no decision that we should make without Him;
- nothing but our best that should be given to Him;
- no commitment ever wasted on Him;
- no service ever forgotten by Him;
- no act of worship ever lost on Him.

It is no wonder that the saints, who fully understand it in that future day, cannot help but sing,

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

ⁱ Randy Alcorn, Heaven (Tyndale, 2004), p. xxi.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Charismatic Chaos (Zondervan, 1992), p. 24.

^{iv} Alcorn, p. 5.

^v Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1992), p. 345.

^{vi} Steven Lawson, Heaven Help Us! (NavPress, 1995), p. 37.

^{vii} Thomas, p. 349.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 349.

^{ix} Ray Stedman, God’s Final Word (Discover House, 1991), p. 119.

^x John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1999), p. 151.

^{xi} John Phillips, Exploring Revelation (Loizeaux Brothers, 1991), p. 84.

^{xii} Stewart Custer, From Patmos to Paradise (BJU Press, 2004), p. 54.

^{xiii} MacArthur, Revelation, p. 158.

^{xiv} Lawson, p. 44.