

“And above the firmament over their heads was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone; on the likeness of the throne was a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it. Also from the appearance of His waist and upward I saw, as it were, the color of amber with the appearance of fire all around within it; and from the appearance of His waist and downward I saw, as it were, the appearance of fire with brightness all around. Like the appearance of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the brightness all around it. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking....

“Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a great thunderous voice: ‘Blessed is the glory of the Lord from His place!’ I also heard the noise of the wings of the living creatures that touched one another, and the noise of the wheels beside them, and a great thunderous noise” (Ezekiel 1:4-6, 9, 10, 12-14, 16, 17, 20, 21, 26-28; 3:12, 13, NKJV).

Clearly, Isaiah and Ezekiel were privileged to behold the same throne-room scene John saw. Putting all of their accounts together, we can see that the four living creatures are some majestic and powerful beings who play a major part in all that transpires on earth:

- They occupy positions of high authority and great responsibility near the throne of God.
- The scope of their work encompasses the four quarters of the earth, which means their mission is focused on us humans.
- They are at the continual command of the Holy Spirit, going and doing as He wills.
- Their work is complex and highly organized, like wheels within wheels.
- They are looking for people who will cooperate with them in their mission.
- They have power to call men into divine service and empower them to speak God’s word.
- They execute their countless tasks with great speed, like lightning flashing forth from the throne of God.

The four faces must represent four facets of their character and mission. The face of a man could represent that they possess human intelligence or sympathy. The face of a lion could represent that they possess great courage. The face of an ox could represent that they are patient or submissive. The face of an eagle could mean that they are swift to carry out their work.

The four living creatures are exalted, heavenly beings who work closely with God to accomplish the plan of our salvation.

The lightning John saw flashing around the throne and the thunder and voices he heard reveal the unending coming and going of the four living creatures, the Holy Spirit, and the angels as they all minister to human beings. Not one man, woman or child is forgotten. Every moment of every day all of heaven’s resources are poured out to this planet in rebellion.

Each prayer is heard: The Elders present them before the throne. Each prayer is answered: The Holy Spirit, in perfect wisdom, considers every plea and sends forth the living creatures to arrange for the outworking of providence for our good. They are all dedicated, without reserve and without selfish interest, to doing all they possibly can to deliver every responsive soul safely to the shores of the sea of glass before the throne of God.

# Unlocking Revelation

## Peering Through Heaven’s Open Door

**F**ar beyond the moon, the sun, and the stars; far beyond Pleiades and Orion; beyond all that is visible with the most powerful telescope on earth, is that part of the universe where God dwells. He is so very far away, this God who made us.

Or is He?

In one sense He is, but in another sense He is very near. While the universe seems enormous to us humans, with all the limitations that are common to our nature, to God it’s not really all that big, since God Himself is so big. From His perspective, planet earth must be as close as the tip of His finger. Perhaps the wind is His breath, the rain His tears, and the sunshine His smile! Well, maybe not, but at least He governs the powers of nature by His sovereign authority.

Since heaven is so far away, we might be tempted to believe that God has forgotten about us, or has at least lost interest in our day-to-day lives. But nothing could be farther from the truth. The Bible declares, “He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:27, 28, NKJV). In fact, He is so close that “he who touches you touches the apple of His eye” (Zechariah 2:8, NKJV).

“Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins?” Jesus once asked. “And not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Luke 12:6, 7, NKJV). Not that God spends a lot of time adding and subtracting our hairs so He can keep an accurate count, but what Jesus is trying to convey is that God has a very, very intimate knowledge of each person and is extremely interested in us.

And there is one way He has come closer to us than we could have ever hoped for or imagined. In the person of Jesus Christ, God stepped out of eternity into our human reality.

Listen with your heart to this chorus of verses:

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh” (1 Timothy 3:16).

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 2, 14).

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

“Wherefore in all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted” (Hebrews 2:17, 18).

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, became a human being so He could:

- proclaim God’s grace and truth,
- die on the cross for our salvation,
- experience our trials and temptations,
- and ascend to heaven as our Brother to be our merciful and faithful High Priest.

Because God is so interested in us, and because Jesus is our understanding and sympathetic High Priest, the very throne of the universe, with all its power and resources, is at our disposal:

“For we have not an High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us



therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15, 16).

Jesus, our Brother and Advocate, has entered heaven and stands before God’s throne on our behalf, to meet our every need. Because God wants us to know this, He has graciously opened a door, as it were, into heaven, that we might get a glimpse of all the activity focused earthward that transpires in that higher realm of glory.

### ***Heaven’s Open Door***

The author of the book of Hebrews tell us where Jesus went after His resurrection:

“Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man” (Hebrews 8:1, 2).

The book of Revelation opens to our curious gaze the very sanctuary of heaven itself. Listen as John begins to describe what he saw:

“After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. And immediately I was in the Spirit; and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. And He that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald” (Revelation 4:1-3).

As we peer with John within that open door, we hear a voice like a trumpet. Its message is clear: we will be shown things that will happen in the future.

Immediately our attention turns to the center of focus in the temple—the throne of the universe, upon which God is seated. The scene is awesome and brilliant. The throne is the point from which proceeds all power, all wisdom, all love, indeed all of life itself.

### ***The Rainbow Around the Throne***

As we continue looking, John directs our attention to a rainbow that encircles the throne. Why a rainbow? Every detail of the scene is intended to communicate to us. It must have some special meaning.

A rainbow is created by the union of sunlight and rain. The rainbow around God’s throne represents the perfect union of mercy (the sunshine) and justice (the rainstorm) in His character. Once, in Noah’s day, God destroyed the earth with rain as an execution of justice for the great evil of the people. But soon the rain stopped and the sun shown through the clouds in mercy. Then Noah saw the first rainbow, a pledge that God would never again destroy the earth with a flood (see Genesis 9:13-15).

The ultimate union of mercy and justice is witnessed

at the cross of Christ. There we see the righteousness of a God who could not excuse sin, and the compassion of a God who loved us too much to let us perish without doing all He could to save us. In Christ “mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Psalm 85:10). By virtue of His willingness to die for our sins, God is able to “be just and the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus” (Romans 3:26). All of this is conveyed in the symbolism of the rainbow around God’s throne. “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; mercy and truth go before Your face” (Psalm 89:14, NKJV).

### ***The Twenty-Four Elders***

“And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold.... The four and twenty elders fall down before Him that sat on the throne, and worship Him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created” (Revelation 4:4, 10, 11).

Around the throne are gathered a group called *the twenty-four elders*. Who are they? They are definitely not angels or any other order of heavenly beings, for nowhere in the Bible are angels called *elders*. This distinguished title is reserved in Scripture for human beings who are recognized as individuals of honor and experience (see 1 Timothy 5:1, 2, 19; 1 Peter 5:1-5). Because of their spiritual maturity, elders hold positions of responsibility.

John saw the twenty-four elders cast their crowns before the throne. The fact that they have crowns suggests that they are some of the overcomers of earth. “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8; see also Revelation 2:10; 3:11).

The twenty-four elders have their foreshadowing in the Old Testament sanctuary system. The ancient priesthood was divided into twenty-four groups who rotated in their service. It was their responsibility to assist the high priest in his work (see 1 Chronicles 24:1-18). Revelation indicates that the twenty-four elders participate with Christ, our great High Priest, in the priestly work of the heavenly sanctuary. They possess “golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of the saints” (Revelation 5:8). Since they themselves were once sinners in need of the Savior’s grace, they are able to assist Christ in His work as High Priest.

We conclude then that the twenty-four elders are human beings who were once on earth. Now they are in

heaven and are involved in Christ’s ministry for us. But how and when did they go to heaven? The Bible tells us that when Christ arose from the dead, He also raised some others who were asleep in their graves (see Matthew 27:50-53; Ephesians 4:8). From among these who were resurrected with Christ must have come the twenty-four elders.

### ***The Seven Spirits and the Four Living Creatures***

“And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to Him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders fall down before Him that sat on the throne, and worship Him that liveth forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created” (Revelation 4:5-11).

Evidently there is a great amount of activity that continually occurs around God’s throne. We have already seen that the twenty-four elders are there, holding golden vials full of incense, representing the prayers of God’s children on earth. But now we see lightning and hear thunder and voices. We see also seven spirits and four living creatures. What does it all mean?

The seven spirits of God clearly represent the perfect ministry of the Holy Spirit. There is only one Holy Spirit, not seven. But seven is a symbolic number intended to convey the idea of completeness and perfection. The Holy Spirit carries on a continual and flawless ministry for the people of earth. John saw Jesus as “a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent forth into all the earth” (Revelation 5:6). Jesus sends forth the Holy Spirit with perfect power (the seven horns) and perfect wisdom (the seven eyes) to meet the needs of all who are in this world. It is His work to lead humans to sense their need of a Savior, to draw their hearts to Christ, to convict the conscience of sin, and to empower those who come to Christ to repent of their sins and reach out to others.

The four living creatures were seen in vision by Isaiah and Ezekiel long before John saw them:

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!’

“And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: ‘Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.’

“Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.’

“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me’” (Isaiah 6:1-8, NKJV).

“Then I looked, and behold, a whirlwind was coming out of the north, a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself; and brightness was all around it and radiating out of its midst like the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire. Also from within it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. Each one had four faces, and each one had four wings.... Their wings touched one another. The creatures did not turn when they went, but each one went straight forward. As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right side, each of the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and each of the four had the face of an eagle.... And each one went straight forward; they went wherever the Spirit wanted to go, and they did not turn when they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches going back and forth among the living creatures. The fire was bright, and out of the fire went lightning. And the living creatures ran back and forth, in appearance like a flash of lightning....

“The appearance of the wheels and their workings was like the color of beryl, and all four had the same likeness. The appearance of their workings was, as it were, a wheel in the middle of a wheel. When they moved, they went toward any one of four directions; they did not turn aside when they went. . . . Wherever the Spirit wanted to go, they went, because there the Spirit went; and the wheels were lifted together with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. When those went, these went; when those stood, these stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up together with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. . . .