

CHAPTER 4

In this chapter the prophetic scene opens; and, as the epistolary part opened with a vision of Christ (Revelation 1), so this part is introduced with a glorious appearance of the great God, whose throne is in heaven, compassed about with the heavenly host. This discovery was made to John, and in this chapter he,

- I. Records the heavenly sight he saw (v. 1-7). And then,
- II. The heavenly songs he heard (v. 8 to the end).

⌄ REVELATION 4:1-8

THE VISION OF HEAVEN

We have here an account of a second vision with which the apostle John was favoured: *After this*, that is, not only “after I had seen the vision of Christ walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks,” but “after I had taken his messages from his mouth, and written and sent them to the several churches, according to his command, after this I had another vision.” Those who well improve the discoveries they have had of God already are prepared thereby for more, and may expect them. Observe,

I. The preparation made for the apostle's having this vision.

1. *A door was opened in heaven.* Hence we learn,

(1.) Whatever is transacted on earth is first designed and settled in heaven; there is the model of all the works of God; all of them are therefore before his eye, and he lets the inhabitants of heaven see as much of them as is fit for them.

(2.) We can know nothing of future events but what God is pleased to discover to us; they are within the veil, till God opens the door. But,

(3.) So far as God reveals his designs to us we may and ought to receive them, and not pretend to be wise above what is revealed.

2. To prepare John for the vision, a trumpet was sounded, and he was called up into heaven, to have a sight there of the things which were to be hereafter. He was called into the third heavens.

(1.) There is a way opened into the holiest of all, into which the sons of God may enter by faith and holy affections now, in their spirits when they die, and in their whole persons at the last day.

(2.) We must not intrude into the secret of God's presence, but stay till we are called up to it.

3. To prepare for this vision, *the apostle was in the Spirit*. He was in a rapture, as before (⁶¹⁰Revelation 1:10), whether in the body or out of the body we cannot tell; perhaps he himself could not; however all bodily actions and sensations were for a time suspended, and his spirit was possessed with the spirit of prophecy, and wholly under a divine influence. The more we abstract ourselves from all corporeal things the more fit we are for communion with God; the body is a veil, a cloud, and clog to the mind in its transactions with God. We should as it were forget it when we go in before the Lord in duty, and be willing to drop it, that we may go up to him in heaven. This was the *apparatus* to the vision. Now observe,

II. The vision itself. It begins with the strange sights that the apostle saw, and they were such as these: —

1. He saw *a throne set in heaven*, the seat of honour, and authority, and judgment. Heaven is the throne of God; there he resides in glory, and thence he gives laws to the church and to the whole world, and all earthly thrones are under the jurisdiction of this throne that is set in heaven.

2. He saw a glorious one upon the throne. This throne was not empty; there was one in it who filled it, and that was God, who is here described by those things that are most pleasant and precious in our world: *His countenance was like a jasper and a sardine-stone*; he is not described by any human features, so as to be represented by an image, but only by his transcendent brightness. This jasper is a transparent stone, which yet offers to the eye a variety of the most vivid colours, signifying the glorious perfections of God; the sardine-stone is red, signifying the justice of God, that essential attribute of which he never divests himself in favour of any, but gloriously exerts it in the government of the world, and especially of the church, through our Lord Jesus Christ. This attribute is displayed in

pardoning as well as in punishing, in saving as well as in destroying sinners.

3. He saw *a rainbow about the throne, like unto an emerald*, v. 3. The rainbow was the seal and token of the covenant of the providence that God made with Noah and his posterity with him, and is a fit emblem of that covenant of promise that God has made with Christ as the head of the church, and all his people in him, which covenant is as the waters of Noah unto God, an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure. This rainbow looked like *the emerald*; the most prevailing colour was a pleasant green, to show the reviving and refreshing nature of the new covenant.

4. He saw *four-and-twenty seats* round about the throne, not empty, but filled with *four-and-twenty elders*, presbyters, representing, very probably, the whole church of God, both in the Old-Testament and in the New-Testament state; not the ministers of the church, but rather the representatives of the people. Their sitting denotes their honour, rest, and satisfaction; their sitting about the throne signifies their relation to God, their nearness to him, the sight and enjoyment they have of him. *They are clothed in white raiment*, the righteousness of the saints, both imputed and inherent; *they had on their heads crowns of gold*, signifying the honour and authority given them of God, and the glory they have with him. All these may in a lower sense be applied to the gospel church on earth, in its worshipping assemblies; and, in the higher sense, to the church triumphant in heaven.

5. He perceived lightnings and voices proceeding out of the throne; that is, the awful declarations that God makes to his church of his sovereign will and pleasure. Thus he gave forth the law on mount Sinai; and the gospel has not less glory and authority than the law, though it be of a more spiritual nature.

6. He saw *seven lamps of fire burning before the throne*, which are explained to be *the seven Spirits of God* (v. 5), the various gifts, graces, and operations of the Spirit of God in the churches of Christ; these are all dispensed according to the will and pleasure of him who sits upon the throne.

7. He saw *before the throne a sea of glass, like unto crystal*. As in the temple there was a great vessel of brass filled with water, in which the

priests were to wash when they went to minister before the Lord (and this was called a *sea*), so in the gospel church the sea or laver for purification is the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, who cleanses from all sin, even from sanctuary-sins. In this all those must be washed that are admitted into the gracious presence of God on earth or his glorious presence in heaven.

8. He saw *four animals*, living creatures, between the throne and the circle of elders (as seems most probable), standing between God and the people; these seem to signify the ministers of the gospel, not only because of this their situation nearer to God, and between him and the elders or representatives of the Christian people, and because fewer in number than the people, but as they are here described,

(1.) By their many eyes, denoting sagacity, vigilance, and circumspection.

(2.) By their lion-like courage, their great labour and diligence (in which they resemble the ox), their prudence and discretion becoming men, and their sublime affections and speculations, by which they mount up *with wings like eagles towards heaven* (v. 7), and these wings full of eyes within, to show that in all their meditations and ministrations they are to act with knowledge, and especially should be well acquainted with themselves and the state of their own souls, and see their own concern in the great doctrines and duties of religion, watching over their own souls as well as the souls of the people.

(3.) By their continual employment, and that is, praising God, and not ceasing to do so night and day. The elders sit and are ministered unto; these stand and minister: they rest not night nor day. This now leads to the other part of the representation.

⌘ REVELATION 4:8-11

THE VISION OF HEAVEN

We have considered the sights that the apostle saw in heaven: now let us observe the songs that he heard, for there is in heaven not only that to be seen which will highly please a sanctified eye, but there is that to be heard which will greatly delight a sanctified ear. This is true concerning the church of Christ here, which is a heaven upon earth, and it will be eminently so in the church made perfect in the heaven of heavens.

I. He heard the song of the four living creatures, of the ministers of the church, which refers to the prophet Isaiah's vision, ch. 6. And here,

1. They adore one God, and one only, *the Lord God Almighty*, unchangeable and everlasting.

2. They adore three holies in this one God, the Holy Father, the Holy Son, and the Holy Spirit; and these are one infinitely holy and eternal Being, who sits upon the throne, *and lives for ever and ever*. In this glory the prophet saw Christ, and spoke of him.

II. He heard the adorations of the *four-and-twenty elders*, that is, of the Christian people represented by them; the ministers led, and the people followed, in the praises of God, v. 10, 11. Here observe,

1. The object of their worship, the same with that which the ministers adored: *Him that sat on the throne*, the eternal everliving God. The true church of God has one and the same object of worship. Two different objects of worship, either co-ordinate or sub-ordinate, would confound the worship and divide the worshippers. It is unlawful to join in divine worship with those who either mistake or multiply the object. There is but one God, and he alone, as God, is worshipped by the church on earth and in heaven.

2. The acts of adoration.

(1.) They *fell down before him that sat on the throne*; they discovered the most profound humility, reverence, and godly fear.

(2.) They *cast their crowns before the throne*; they gave God the glory of the holiness wherewith he had crowned their souls on earth and the honour and happiness with which he crowns them in heaven. They owe all their graces and all their glories to him, and acknowledge that his crown is infinitely more glorious than theirs, and that it is their glory to be glorifying God.

3. The words of adoration: they said, *Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honour, and power*, v. 11. Observe,

(1.) They do not say, *We give thee glory, and honour, and power*; for what can any creature pretend to give unto God? But they say, *thou art worthy to receive glory*.

(2.) In this they tacitly acknowledge that God is exalted far above all blessing and praise. He was worthy to receive glory, but they were not worthy to praise, nor able to do it according to his infinite excellences.

4. We have the ground and reason of their adoration, which is threefold:

(1.) He is the Creator of all things, the first cause; and none but the Creator of all things should be adored; no made thing can be the object of religious worship.

(2.) He is the preserver of all things, and his preservation is a continual creation; they are created still by the sustaining power of God. All beings but God are dependent upon the will and power of God, and no dependent being must be set up as an object of religious worship. It is the part of the best dependent beings to be worshippers, not to be worshipped.

(3.) He is the final cause of all things: *For thy pleasure they are and were created.* It was his will and pleasure to create all things; he was not put upon it by the will of another; there is no such thing as a subordinate creator, that acts under and by the will and power of another; and, if there were, he ought not to be worshipped. As God made all things at his pleasure, so he made them for his pleasure, to deal with them as he pleases and to glorify himself by them one way or other. Though he delights not in the death of sinners, but rather that they should turn and live, *yet he hath made all things for himself,* ^{<2164>}Proverbs 16:4. Now if these be true and sufficient grounds for religious worship, as they are proper to God alone, Christ must needs be God, one with the Father and Spirit, and be worshipped as such; for we find the same causality ascribed to him.

^{<3016>}Colossians 1:16, 17, *All things were created by him and for him, and he is before all things, and by him all things consist.*