

THE CENTER OF POWER

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 4:1-11

Tenth Message

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It may have been "Take Your Child To Work Day" or something like that. I don't know how old I was. I'm not even sure which city we lived in at the time. But I can remember the feeling of walking into my father's office at work.

He worked for a large oil company. He was somewhere in the middle of the company organization chart. Some people reported to him. He reported to others. But I remember being wowed by the experience of seeing him at work. How his administrative assistant talked to him. The layout of his office. The way people greeted him with respect and warmth.

Up until that point, I'd never seen my dad in that context. I'd only known him at home, with my mom and my siblings. At extended family gatherings. At family meals and vacations. This was a different side of him. He had a different kind of authority at work. I can see him sitting behind his desk, in that place where he did his work. I can vividly recall how I felt seeing him in that new context.

Today we're continuing our series in the book of Revelation. We've called our series Wake Up because we're hoping that the powerful imagery in this book would give us a deeper sense of spiritual awareness. In the first chapter, we encountered a dramatic vision of Jesus. Then we looked at seven letters to different churches in Asia Minor.

Our passage this morning is like God's take-your-followers-to-work day. We will get a majestic view of God in the place where he rules over the universe. We will see God in the center of power.

Our passages for this week and next are some of the richest and most vivid pictures of worship in the entire Bible. This week we will see God in all his power. Next week we will see Jesus in all his glory. Chapters 4 and 5 together describe an incredible vision.

In fact, the entire Gospel is contained in these chapters. The whole picture of what God intended,

what happened, and how he responded. Beauty, pain, heartbreak, restoration, hope, and fulfillment. We will see God's two great gifts to his creation. We will see why Jesus is unique. We will be shown a new kind of picture of God's power and love.

At the center of all of this is the sovereignty of God. God, Almighty, on his throne. Forty-seven times, the New Testament talks about a throne. Three-quarters of those references are in the book of Revelation. Fourteen of them, almost a quarter of all the references to a throne in the New Testament, are in this chapter.

Are you prepared to enter the throne room of God? As we work our way through this chapter, we'll take John's journey with him. First we'll see the door and experience walking through it. As we step into the throne room, we'll look around and see what we see. Finally, we'll see what happens in the throne room, or more accurately, we'll hear what happens in this room.

I'll do my best to let the powerful imagery of the text speak for itself. We're not going to walk out of here this morning with "Ten Incredible Things You Never Knew About God's Throne Room." We're not even really going to have principles for changing our lives. But my hope and prayer are that we will be changed by the experience of God's throne room.

We'll see God in a new context. We'll see ourselves in a new light, and hopefully respond in the only possible way to react when you come into such a place of immense power. Worship. We're going to enter the throne room and respond in worship.

Entering the throne room

Our chapter opens with a description of John's invitation into this incredible place of cosmic power.

Revelation 4:1:

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."

We've heard a lot about doors for the last several weeks. Two weeks ago we heard about a door that only Jesus could open. Last week we heard about Jesus knocking on a door that we were supposed to open. But not until this week have we been able to cross through the door and see what lies beyond.

We tell many stories about doors which lead to something mysterious—even cosmic—beyond. Think about the forgotten wardrobe in a British house which leads to the land of Narnia. The Netflix TV show *Stranger Things* features a gate that has been opened on the dark world of the "Upside-Down." The children's movie *Monster's, Inc.* shows us doors leading from the world of monsters into children's bedrooms. There are dozens of other examples.

I think we have all these stories because we know deep within us that there is somewhere else. And we have an insatiable longing to go there and find out what it's like. When John walks through that door, he isn't only going somewhere else. He also seems to be going somewhere else. In Revelation 1:19, we are told that the vision John receives has to do with "those [things] that are and those that are to take place after this." Here the angel promises to show John "what must take place after this."

That phrase "after this" generally refers to what theologians call "eschatological events." When the Bible talks about the "last days" or "the day of the LORD" or anything like that, this is what it's referring to. Those events that are leading up to the final conclusion of God's plan on earth.

In some sense, we are in those days. As we work our way through the next 18 chapters of Revelation, we'll see things that have already happened, like the birth of Jesus and his resurrection. In our chapter today, we'll see things that seem to be always happening—eternal events. And we'll see things which will happen in the future.

But it's not always clear which passages fall into which categories. Chapter 4 of Revelation seems to describe the throne room in eternal terms. Chapter 5 seems to talk about a more specific event which will happen in the future. But the chronology of this book is fluid. It jumps around.

I think that's part of the point. The way time works in this book of Revelation is a bit unpredictable. Which,

if you think about it, is kind of predictable. If we're flipping back and forth between an eternal being and his temporal creation, we might expect the timing to be a bit confusing.

We're not supposed to be fixated on when everything is happening. The purpose of this book is not so that we know what is going to happen when. It's not to give us a timeline so that when things start to happen we can check off the boxes. The purpose is to give us a picture of God's final work in the world which enables us to live more faithfully in the present.

With all of that background, let's walk through the door and see what we see.

Looking around the throne room

We're going to take a visual tour of the throne room now. John sees something. It's hard to put words to something you see. But it's also hard to see what someone else is describing in words. So I'll read the whole section of this passage, then we'll look at each element of the vision in turn.

Revelation 4:2-8a:

At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. 3 And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. 4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. 5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, 6 and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: 7 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. 8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within,

It's an intense vision with lots of different parts. We've put together a little visual aid to help us see where all the parts fit together. I didn't want to make it too detailed because we're meant to see this in our imagination. But some kind of a map was helpful to me. So we'll look at each element and see how it fits into the whole.

First, there is the "throne in heaven." This vision of the throne draws on three different visions in the Old Testament. In Daniel 7:9, we hear that "thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat." In Ezekiel 1:26, we see "above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne." Finally, in Isaiah 6:1, the prophet "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up."

The vision that John sees combines aspects of Daniel's vision, Ezekiel's vision, and Isaiah's vision. John's is the fullest picture yet.

Around the throne is a "rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald." We are reminded of God's promise to Noah. Perhaps the rainbow in God's throne room served as a reminder to him.

Also around the throne are "twenty-four thrones and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders." This is not just where God exercises his authority. Others have authority here as well. We may remember the promise to the church of Thyatira that they will rule alongside God.

People have spent a lot of time wondering who these twenty-four elders are. Angelic members of the holy court? Representatives of the twenty-four priestly duties from 1 Chronicles? Or heavenly beings who represent the twelve tribes of the Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New Testament? That's probably my best guess. These elders have some of the elements promised to "those who conquer" from the seven letters — thrones, white robes, and golden crowns. They seem to represent God's faithful people who rule alongside him.

Then we have "flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder." Sounds a bit like Mount Sinai when God made his presence known to Moses in Exodus 19:16. Perhaps the throne room came close to the top of that mountain.

"Seven torches of fire" assembled before the throne. This was probably the candlestick with seven candles. Similar to what today we might call a menorah. The fire represented the Spirit of God.

The "sea of glass like crystal" could have been a large washbasin like the molten sea in the Old Testament temple (1 Kings 7:23-26). It was used to wash the priests and the sacrifices. Or it could be a sea of an ocean. In either case, the water which would have been chaotic to the Israelites was clean and calm as glass.

Finally, there were "four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind." Each creature had a different face: a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. Daniel saw four slightly different beasts who represented four kingdoms. Ezekiel saw beasts with the same faces, but each beast had all four faces. Isaiah saw seraphim with six wings like these creatures. They seem to represent the created order of life.

We're at a bit of a disadvantage when we read this description. We don't know much about throne rooms. We can track down all the historical background for what it may have been like. There was undoubtedly a great deal of comparison between this throne room and what would have existed in 1st century Rome. 1st century readers would have recognized many of these elements.

For most of us, we are tempted to try to figure out what all this means. There are so many questions. Who are the 24 elders? Why seven torches? What do the creatures represent? How can a rainbow look like an emerald? Are the colors of the stones significant? Why do the wings have eyes?

You can find nine theories on the 24 elders with sub-theories and supporting documentation. You can do all the research and try to understand what is behind each element. But what if the main point of this vision is to give us a picture of something we can't quite understand?

When I walked into my father's office at work, I saw notes in his inbox. I overheard snippets of conversation. I saw documents he was reviewing. None of it made sense to me. How could it?

Do we really expect to be able to walk into to the throne room of the creator of the universe and understand everything we see?

Perhaps we are supposed to simply take it in. Be full of questions. Swim in the mystery of it. We are in the throne room of God. Just experience it. Experience the awe.

Before becoming a pastor, I worked as a Product Manager for Oracle, developing software. Our product was a piece of a much broader suite of products which

all worked together. Pretty soon after I started, I was assigned to be part of a team with members from five or six other teams. We were working through a particularly complicated flow which touched all of our products.

During that first meeting, I sat around a large conference room and barely understood the words that were spoken. I didn't know the people. I didn't know the terminology. I barely knew how my product worked, much less the other products represented.

But my job was to figure it out. And I did. I figured out who the significant players were. I figured out the complicated flow. I figured out all the touchpoints between products because my job was to figure it out.

Most of the time, our job is to figure it out. That's what life usually asks of us. But not here. We don't have to figure this out. We just have to experience it.

Maybe the reason God made this vision and this book so rich in imagery is because he was trying to make it impossible for us to figure it out. He wanted us to give up and just experience him through these powerful scenes. When we stop trying to figure it out, we stop trying to control it. When you stop trying to control it, you allow someone else to be in charge. And when you enter the throne room of God, the one thing you should realize is that someone else is in charge.

When you experience the awe of the throne room of God, if there's one thing you realize it ought to be that you aren't on that throne. But God is. And that is a very good thing.

Listening in the throne room

Having looked around the throne room of God, now we stop and listen to what happens in this place. What we will experience is a call and response between heaven and earth that is as old as time itself.

Revelation 4:8-11:

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" 9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 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, saying, 11 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

The four living creatures probably represent the breadth of creation. The twenty-four elders are probably heavenly representatives of the people of God—the tribes and apostles of God's kingdom.

This scene we witness here begins with the living creatures calling out about the holiness of God. In response, the elders fall down and describe the worthiness of God. We seem to hear one pair of a cycle that goes on forever. All day and night the creatures declare God's holiness. Whenever they do, the elders respond with God's worthiness. Holiness and worthiness back and forth. Over and over again.

Earth and heaven are calling out to other in an eternal cosmic call and response, worshipping God for his holiness and worthiness.

Let's see what this sounds like for a moment. Half of us will be the living creatures. Half will be the 24 elders. The creatures call out,

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty."

And the elders respond,

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

This call and response is the sound of heaven—the sound of the throne room of God. This is the sound of all creation in worship.

Let's look a little deeper at what they are saying about God. What is this worship all about?

In a word: creation. God is worshipped because he created.

The four living creatures begin by talking about God's holiness. To be holy is to be set apart. To be other. To be distinct from everything else. One of the things that makes God holy—set apart and unique—is just that he is and always has been. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come."

I'm the youngest of three children in my family. Which mean there were five years in the Taylor family

that I missed out on. There was a Taylor family, but there was no Paul Taylor to be a part of it. That concept has always bothered me. Even more so when my parents or siblings would talk about the days "before I came along." And worst was when they referred to those days as the "good old days."

Here's what bothers me: there was a time when I wasn't.

That's true for all of us. We had a beginning. Something happened—no need to go into any more detail here—and our existence began. Everything and everyone in this world began.

But not God. God was and is and is to come. God has no beginning. He has always been.

When Moses pressed God to give a name so that he could be referred to, the name God chose seems to merely be a statement of existence. "I am." The most fundamental thing about God is that he exists. With five letters, you can articulate one of the deepest theological statements possible: "God is."

All other existence is derivative. We exist because something happened. This building exists because someone built it. Trees exist because a seed was nourished and grew. But God is for no other reason than that he is.

The creatures spoke about God, "Holy is the Lord". Now the elders chime in and speak directly to God, "Worthy are you." The creatures speak of God's existence, "who was and is and is to come". The elders speak of God granting existence to others, "you created all things and by your will they existed." The creatures stand apart from God. But the elders sit, enthroned with God. They share in the power of this room.

In ancient times, there was never merely a king. It's not like we think of a king. There were always little kings, bigger kings, and the biggest king. In fact, in the first century, the Emperor Domitian of Rome would demand that lesser kings cast their crowns before him and declare, "Worthy are you." Sound familiar?

These little kings weren't throwing away their authority. They were acknowledging that the one on the throne gave them their authority. They were kings. But the Emperor was the King of Kings. But they don't just owe their authority to the King of Kings. They owe their very existence.

This is the first gift that God gives. We'll see the second gift next week. But God gives this first gift to every living creature on the earth. It is simply the gift of being. The gift of existence. The gift of life.

God exists. He is life. But like a child who takes the candy out of his mouth to share it, God wanted others to experience what he had. So he created others and gave them the gift of existence—everyone alive shares in this first of God's great gift.

Everyone receives this gift. Not everyone knows the giver. But if you do, then you turn to him in gratitude and thanks and acknowledgement of what he has done. You turn to him in worship.

We worship God because he created us. Worship the Creator.

Isn't this the most fundamental question we ask? Why do we exist at all?

Erich Fromm, the German philosopher, said, "Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve." ¹

Robert Fulghum, author of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten* writes, "To be human is to keep rattling the bars of the cage of existence, hollering, 'What's it for?'" ²

But here is our answer: we exist because God wanted to give us the gift of existence. We owe the very fact that we are to him. And because of that, we fall down and praise him.

Aren't you glad that you are? Isn't life itself a precious gift? My back hurts, I wish I could sleep more, my relationships are complicated, and I wish I were less stressed out. But I'm only able to complain because I am. And thank God I am. I'd rather have all those things than not to be at all.

But God hasn't just given us life; he's given us life in relationship to him. We say to him, "Worthy are you." We speak to the one who gave us our very being. We get to walk around in life knowing that he is with us. God has given us life and life with him.

The living creatures declare,

Holy is the God who is!

The elders respond,

Worthy are you for creating us!

Let's try repeating that. Picture yourself in the throne room of God. You are peeking behind the curtain of existence itself. And it is glorious.

Conclusion

I think back to that day when I visited my father in his office. I saw where he made decisions, interacted with people, and fulfilled the responsibilities of his job. I came away with a different view of my dad. Not a completely different person, but a new window into who he is.

This scene today is similar. We have followed the prophet John as he gets invited into the throne room of God. This is the center of power.

This is where God makes decisions, interacts with the world, and fulfills the responsibilities of his role. God is with us. We have the Spirit of God present with us when we wake up, go to the grocery store, go to work or class, and come home to relax.

But now we've been invited to God's office. I hope you've come away with a fuller picture of who God is. I hope you have a new perspective on the mystery of God as Creator. Everyone in the world has received the incredible gift of existence. We all exist because of God. That's the first great gift God gives.

Next week, the picture will be filled out as we understand the second great gift God gives us. As incredible as existence is and as powerful as God is as creator, next week we'll see the even greater mystery of redemption. God has created us. But God has also redeemed us.

This morning we have seen the throne room of God. We have marveled at God's power and his goodness in giving the gift of creation. In response, we worship.

EndNotes

- ¹ Erich Fromm, "Erich Fromm Quotes." *BrainyQuote*. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/erich_fromm_151837
- ² Robert Fulghum, "Robert Fulghum Quotes." *BrainyQuote* https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/robert_fulghum