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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“HOLY, HOLY, HOLY”**

**Revelation 4:1-11**

*What does the future hold?* The future is a cause of great curiosity, worry, and outright fear. What will happen to us in the days ahead?

Please turn with me to Revelation chapter 4.

■ Verse 1: **“After this I”** the apostle John **“looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet”** – that is, the voice of the Risen and Ascended Christ – **“said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’”**

“What *must* take place after this”? What will happen next? Everyone wants to know, don’t they?

Millions wait with baited breath for the leading economic indicators to predict U.S. economic performance.

Tens of millions actually expect their horoscope, or the tea leaves, or Dionne Warwick’s “psychic friends” to show them what lies ahead.

Hundreds of millions count on the weather forecast to help them get dressed in the morning.

Yet we are frustratingly, cripplingly nearsighted. We can see no farther than a few feet into the future. What lies ahead? What does tomorrow hold? Only God knows!

Isn’t that why so many people are fascinated by Revelation?

This book does, indeed, address events that are yet to come; but contrary to popular misconception, it is not a

step-by-step guide through the future. The book of Revelation more closely resembles a 100 miles-to-the-inch interstate highway map than it does a ½ mile -to-the-inch street map.

That is no accident. It is God’s intent that we focus first and foremost on the *who* of the future, secondly on the *what’s* of the future, and only then on the *when’s* of the future. Our faith, hope and love do not depend on what the future holds, and when it all happens; they depend on the One who holds the future.

I realize that this is not the most popular way to approach Revelation. Yet I am not imposing this idea on Scripture; I am drawing it out from the Word.

Today’s text is a case in point. In verse 1 Christ Jesus announces: **“I will show you what must take place after this.”** From this we might assume that he will immediately show John a preview of future events.

He does not. Instead, the {Rev 19:16} **“King of kings and Lord of lords”** ushers him into the throne room of heaven and, for the next two chapters, he gives John a front row seat as the angels worship God.

Allow me a personal moment. As a boy of 10, 11, 12, years old I was obsessed with the Apocalypse. I was on the edge of my pew when our church showed the “Thief in the Night” movies. I read and re-read every End Times-themed book I could get my hands on. I even made my own charts.

I also read Revelation. But I usually skimmed the first three chapters and skipped chapter 4 (and similar passages) to get to the juicy parts about the

Anti-Christ and the judgments and the Battle of Armageddon.

Hence my understanding was distorted. It was like looking in a funhouse mirror: some sections looming larger in my vision than they really are, others shrinking from sight. So although the purpose of this book is to inspire faith, hope, and steadfastness, it instilled in me fear, anxiety, and weakness. On at least two days I panicked when I came home from the fourth or fifth grade, found my mother gone, and knew beyond all doubt that I had missed the rapture and would have to face the Tribulation alone.

I could have avoided the bad theology and emotional trauma by focusing on the *who* of the future. Chapter 4 helps us to do precisely that.

■ Verses 2-3: **“At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.”**

That **“someone”** is the first person of the Holy Trinity. In chapter 1 John ascribes a glorified human form to God the Son – but never to the Father. {1 Tim 6:15-16} **“God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords... lives in unapproachable light.”** He is the One **“whom no one has seen or can see.”**

All that John is able to perceive of God’s appearance is his reflected, yet blindingly brilliant luminosity. Precious earthly gemstones are dull and colorless in comparison, yet they are the best available metaphor for the dazzling glory of the One on the throne. He is majestic beyond human imagination.

There is a second message here, which is this: there is another reality, indiscernible to us yet more real than our everyday lives. In this place called heaven there is a throne of unparalleled glory and power that towers over all other thrones. And who is seated there? Not mortal Caesar. Not impersonal Fate. Not the wicked devil. It is the LORD YHWH, King of the Universe. God is on the throne. Nothing can change that.

■ Verses 5 and 6a record the stunning sounds and sights of the throne room: **“From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder,”** as in Exodus 19 when God descended on Sinai with thunder, lightning, fire and smoke and gave to his people the Ten Commandments.

**“Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.”** The Greek is unclear. As the textual note in the NIV indicates, it can also be translated **“the sevenfold spirit of God.”** Either way, it does not indicate seven separate beings but rather the fullness and perfection of the one and only Holy Spirit.

**“Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.”** Glass was rare in John’s day. Crystal clear glass was nearly non-existent. Before the throne is an immense expanse of what looks like pure glass. It reflects God’s splendor and sets him apart from all created beings.

There are several parallels between God’s throne room and the Jerusalem temple (which by this

time had been destroyed by the Roman army). So it is fitting that in heaven worship is the main event.

John sees two groups of worshipers in ch 4.

- In verse 4 we meet Group 1: the elders.

**“Surrounding the throne [are] twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them [are] twenty-four elders. They [are] dressed in white and [have] crowns of gold on their heads.”**

We cannot be certain of their identity. In my opinion they are angels, twelve of whom correspond to the Old Testament patriarchs and the tribes they fathered, and twelve of whom correspond to the NT apostles. If so, they are the angelic counterparts of the entire company of human believers.

- In verses 6b-8a John introduces Group 2: the four living creatures (i.e., the four cherubs or, more properly, cherubim). They are nothing like the naked, plump, winged babies of popular imagination. **“The first... [is] like a lion, the second...like an ox, the third [has] a face like a man, the fourth [is] like a flying eagle. Each...[has] six wings and [is] covered with eyes all around, even under his wings.”**

These angels resemble the ones in Ezekiel’s vision. They might symbolize all mortal creatures, or the best qualities of those creatures, or God’s attributes. They always stand near the throne and lead others in the adoration of God.

- Their worship reveals exactly who is in charge. Verse 8b states that **“Day and night they never stop saying:**

**‘Holy, holy, holy  
is the LORD God Almighty,  
who was, and is and is to come.’”**

Roman propaganda asserts that every Caesar is, by definition, a being of extraordinary virtue. In fact, the best of them have feet of clay and the worst are despicable. God is so righteous, pure, and incorruptible that it is insufficient to say it once: he is **“Holy, holy, holy.”**

The Roman Empire alleges to be invincible. Many are enamored of its military muscle, economic might, and cultural dominance and willingly worship the goddess Roma and the defied Caesar. But Rome will fail. Only the **“LORD”** is **“God Almighty”**.

Pagans chant **“[Jupiter] who was, [Jupiter] who is, and [Jupiter] who will be,”** yet their deities are utterly lifeless. Only God **“was, and is and is to come.”**

- The twenty-four elders also worship. Verses 9-10:

**Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne.**

The Romans have been known to require a defeated king to lay his crown before an image of the

emperor. The elders demonstrate that the Roman ceremony is a sham and every earthly monarch – including Caesar – is subordinate to God.

■ In verse 11 they say:

**“You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were created  
and have their being.”**

When the emperor enters a city its residents shout: **“Worthy art thou!”** This promotes the idea that he reigns not merely by right of succession, but also by right of superior virtue. The elders refute that ideology. God alone is **“worthy.”**

And the elders call him **“Lord and God.”** The emperor Domitian has grabbed that title for himself, and he executes all who will not acknowledge him as such. But only the One the throne is **“Lord and God.”**

The Romans say that Caesar is the father of Roman culture, economy, and empire. In truth, the LORD created the universe. He envisioned it, called it into being, and graciously sustains it by his power.

I would love to know what the future holds, wouldn't you? But that has not been revealed, not with the clarity that is required to plot out every step of the way with absolute certainty.

Thank God our faith, hope and love do not depend on the *what's* and *when's* of the future. They do depend on the *who* of the future, and he has revealed himself.

He is the LORD YHWH, King of the Universe, seated on a throne of unparalleled glory and power that towers over all other thrones.

He is the One from whom emanates dazzling beauty and glory, and he is surrounded by indescribable splendor

He is the only One who is revered by the enigmatic elders and the mysterious living creatures, beings who know divinity when they see it.

He is **“the LORD God Almighty”, “who was, and is and is to come,”** who alone deserves to be called **“Holy, holy, holy.”**

He is **“our Lord and God,”** and he is uniquely **“worthy...to receive glory and honor and power”** for he is our Creator and Sustainer.

These qualities are inherent to God's nature. Nothing will change them.

But are they evident in our lives? Do we reflect and reveal the brilliant light of God's holiness, glory, honor, and power into this dark world?

Our God will accomplish in and through us, his people, as we worship him and spirit and in truth.

And he will accomplish it in and through us as we trust him, even in with our today and our tomorrow, our present and our future.

Our great God is the LORD Almighty, and this is his Word.