

The Church Victorious

Revelation 4

Every member of the Church has fallen short of the glory of God and continues to fall short.

If we have all fallen short of God's glory, what hope do we have of knowing God in all His glory.

Our only hope, and our sure hope, is that we are united to Jesus Christ by faith alone.

Colossians 1:27 says it so succinctly: The great mystery of the Good news that we proclaim is only this: Christ in you, the hope of glory.

In Revelation 2-3, Jesus reveals to His Church the nature of the struggles in which they are engaged here on earth.

Now, in Revelation 4-5, He will reveal to His Church the nature of the glory they will enjoy when their struggles here on earth are complete.

Before we look at the text, I want you to listen to two statements from the Westminster Larger Catechism. This Catechism, along with its companion: The Westminster Shorter Catechism, gives a wonderful articulation of the glory that every member of the Church will enjoy after the struggles of this life are finished.

WLC 86 What is the communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death?

The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls.

WLC 90 What shall be done to the righteous at the day of judgment (the last day)?

At the day of judgment, the righteous, being caught up to Christ in the clouds, (rapture) shall be set on his right hand, and there openly acknowledged and acquitted,

shall join with him in the judging of reprobate angels and men,
and shall be received into heaven,
where they shall be fully and forever freed from all sin and misery;
filled with inconceivable joys,
made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul,
in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels,
but especially in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord
Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity.

This is our preposterous hope!
And it is a hope that rests upon Christ alone. Left to ourselves, we have no right
to this glory.
In Jesus Christ, we have every right to this glory.

The Church's enjoyment of heavenly glory is depicted for us today!

Read Revelation 4:1-11.

After this (these things)
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." (these things)

Jesus is giving to John, and to us through John, a look into heavenly glory.
John sees a door, a portal, into heaven itself.
And he hears a voice, like a trumpet, calling him up through the door.

It makes me imagine John thinking to himself, "Me? You mean I am allowed up
there?"

In 5th grade, my parents took our family to Australia...

... mom

... a different time of flying

... never been on a plane

... San Francisco to Hawaii – 747

... Allowed into the cockpit – after going up the stairs to First class

I felt so incredibly privileged, and important.

How much more privileged and honored are we to be given access to the heavenly throne of glory!!!

“after this” or “after these things”

1. After the previous vision

2. After you conquer – after your struggle here on earth is complete.

This does not mean that the pictures of chapter 4 and 5 must still be future. They must only be future for those who are still in the Church Militant.

John is getting a glimpse into what is occurring in heaven presently. And what will be “his” reality immediately after he finishes his journey on earth.

This is what “must” take place. He does not say, “what might” take place.

If we are to have the courage to endure, we must know that which will be our great reward.

2 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.

With the clarity of the Holy Spirit, John sees the heavenly throne of God. The “one seated on the throne” is God in all His glory.

This gets a little tricky because the doctrine of the Trinity is mysterious. I would argue that it is the Triune God who is seated on the throne: One God in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is possible, because the Spirit is primarily seen in His union with the Church, and because the Son will be associated with His Messianic work as a man, to think of the one on the throne as “only the Father”. But the Scripture does not say it this way. It is not “only the Father” who is on the throne, as if the Son and the Spirit are not also “sitting on the throne”.

In chapter 4, John is seeing the Triune God sitting on His heavenly throne. In chapter 5, John will see the Son who is distinct in His work of salvation as Messiah.

It is important to understand that John’s vision of this heavenly throne is not entirely new. Much of the imagery is found in the prophetic book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is full of images that are also found in Revelation.

Ezekiel was a prophet who lived during the period of the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. Ezekiel was a priest who would have understood the imagery of the Temple and who would have been utterly devastated by its destruction.

Just before the time of Israel’s physical destruction in 586BC, God gave to Ezekiel a vision of the heavenly throne. This was to encourage Ezekiel that even though Jerusalem was being conquered, the LORD continued to reign in heaven.

The situation is very similar in John’s time. The Church is facing many trials in this life, including persecution and martyrdom. The LORD again wants to encourage His people to endure these trials, knowing that He continues to reign in glory. And they, as His people, after their time of suffering, will also dwell with Him in glory.

What is the appearance of the one sitting on the throne?
He had the appearance of jasper and carnelian.
Jasper is a precious gem symbolizing the glory of God.

In chapter 21, when the heavenly city of God descends upon the earth, she will also reflect the glory of God.

Revelation 21:10-11 ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

Carnelian (in the Hebrew = sardius) is also a precious gem, reddish in color. Something like a ruby.

This gem also reflects the glory of God. This gem was one of 12 precious stones that were placed on the breastplate of the high priest. Each stone representing one of the 12 Tribes of Israel. And each stone representing the people of God in glory.

The high priest would regularly “bring” God’s people before His holiness through the symbolism of temple worship. Behind those symbols is a spiritual reality.

Jesus Christ, our heavenly High Priest, brings us into the presence of the glorious God of the Universe.

Hebrews 10:19-23 ¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

The fact that the Church is represented by the same stones as the glory of God is a declaration that the Church will indeed bear the same glory as God.

John is “in the Spirit” seeing the glory of God. And He does not die. This is really the hope of every believer.

Genesis 32:30 ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

If you want to understand the true wonder of Revelation 4, it is not only that God exists in His glory, it is that God’s people exist with God in His glory.

John does not only see the throne. John also sees that which surrounds the throne.

First, he sees a rainbow, resembling an emerald.

The rainbow most likely indicates that God's actions of judgment (much of Revelation is about God's Judgment being poured out) are tempered with His great mercy (The Church exists in glory ONLY because of God's great mercy).

Just beyond the rainbow, John sees 24 other thrones.

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.

How are we to understand these 24 thrones and the 24 elders who are seated on them?

They are the leaders of God's people both in the OT and the NT. In the OT, the twelve sons of Israel became the leaders of the 12 Tribes of Israel. In the NT the 12 Apostles become the leaders of the NT Church, also ruling over Israel.

I believe the 24 are specific people. Oddly enough, one of them is John!!! John is seeing himself in glory!!!

But as rulers they represent the entire Old and New Testament people of God. It is not as if there are 24 people who get to sit around the throne, but the rest of God's people are somewhere else.

These 24 represent all of God's people.

These 24 are clothed in white garments.

The same white garments are promised to all those who conquer in Rev. 2-3.

These 24 are given golden crowns.

Crowns are also promised to all those who conquer.

The wonder of what John is witnessing is that God's people are dwelling with God in His glory. Can you imagine yourself on one of those thrones?

The Church exists in two places at once.

The Church exists here on earth bearing days of trial and suffering.

But the Church also exists in heavenly glory, surrounding the throne of God.

In one sense, you can look at this heavenly glory as your destiny. After your season of trial, after your conquering, you will enter into this heavenly glory. “After these things”...

But in another sense, through your union with Jesus Christ by faith alone, you already exist in glory.

Paul writes of this in the book of Colossians.

Colossians 3:1-4 If (since) then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

John is seeing the reality of which Paul spoke. John is seeing the whole people of God surrounding the glorious throne of God.

It is vitally important for many reasons that the whole church exists with God in glory. One of those reasons is so that she is not consumed in the Judgment of God that is coming upon the world. Instead of being consumed by the wrath of God, the Church exists with God in heavenly glory.

Verse 5 begins to prepare us for the pouring out of God’s wrath upon the earth.

⁵ From the throne came
flashes of lightning,
and
rumblings
and
peals of thunder,

These phrases symbolize God’s wrath that is being poured out upon the earth and so they are repeated at key points in the book of Revelation.

Revelation 8:5 ⁵ Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

being washed. The placing of this “sea” in the same sentence as the “blazing Spirit” joins the two together. We have been washed with pure water and we have been purified by the Holy Spirit. There is no mention of the altar because sacrifices are no longer necessary. In chapter 5, John will emphasize the “blood” of Jesus that has purchased men for God from every tribe and nation.

The cleansing agent of the water is the main point of this view.

The second approach focuses more on the “sea” being “clear as crystal.” This approach depends heavily on the connection of Revelation with the book of Ezekiel, especially chapter 1.

Ezekiel 1:22 ²² Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads.

The “sea of glass” focuses on the surface of the water as a “stretched out expanse”. And this expanse forms a separation of God’s holy throne from the rest of his creation. This image also fits well with Revelation 4. The holiness of the LORD separates him from the world that He will judge. The LORD is holy and therefore in the right position to pour out His wrath upon the earth.

The third approach sees the “sea of glass, clear as crystal” in contrast with the typical picture of the sea in the rest of revelation. In the rest of this Book, the Sea is a place of chaos and evil. It is the place where one of the beasts arises from. It is the image used for the rebellious nations. And, interestingly enough, in chapter 21, in the New Creation, there will be no sea.

Revelation 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

So, here in Revelation 4, the sea of glass may very well depict that around God’s heavenly throne, there is perfect peace. The chaos and rebellion of the world does not enter into God’s heavenly throne.

All three approaches have merit. And they are not entirely disconnected. God is pure and holy, and all who dwell with Him must also be made holy. God is separate from the evil of this world and so is qualified to judge this world. God is sovereign over all evil. He is the God of perfect peace, and He is working to bring peace upon the earth as well.

Now that John has established that the Church indeed dwells in the presence of the LORD around His heavenly throne, he is shown that the Church is not alone around the throne.

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,
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!"

In addition to the Church, there are also four living creatures surrounding the throne.

Without a foundation from the books of Ezekiel and Isaiah, it is difficult to immediately understand that these creatures are angels.

Angels are a part of this creation. The fact that there are four of them here is to symbolize that they carry out the will of the LORD to the four corners of the earth. This will include serving the saints. But it can also include the carrying out of the wrath of God upon the earth. Like the 24 elders, these 4 creatures (sometimes called seraphim) represent the entire order of angels. Excepting, of course, Satan and the rest of the fallen angels.

In the LORD's Prayer, we pray, "your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." God's angels perfectly carry out God's will.

Until recently, I have considered the eyes “front and back” as a reference to the omniscience of God. Of course, angels do not have omniscience, but they do carry out the will of the One who is omniscient.

But Daniel Block, in his commentary on Ezekiel, takes the eyes as a reference to the glittering brilliance of God.

In Ezekiel, the eyes are situated all over the “wheels” of God’s heavenly chariot. Here, the eyes are on the creatures themselves, and their wings. Often, kings would put gems in the wheels of their chariots so that they would glitter as they spun. Block makes a good case that Ezekiel was drawing upon this image. God’s heavenly chariot is brilliantly glittering.

The creatures each depict a different attribute of the LORD whom they serve. Each animal reflects the highest of their particular realms.

The lion is the king of the wild animals. It is likely that he represents nobility and fierceness.

The ox is the strongest of the domesticated animals. He is the symbol of strength and productivity.

The man is the head of this creation. As such, he symbolizes authority and wisdom.

The eagle rules over the sky. He is noble and fierce and swift.

“These four images characterize the cherubim symbolically: they embody boldness and courage, strength and tenacity, intelligence and sagacity, dispatch and swiftness.” Kistemaker.

These angels are smart enough, and powerful enough, to carry out whatever command is given to them by the LORD.

And these angels do not hesitate to do the will of God.

The fact that they “never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come,” should not be taken so much as a mantra repeated like a broken record.

What is being communicated is that these angels always, and only, seek to obey the will of the LORD.

They believe the LORD to be “holy, holy, holy” and so they obey the LORD’s will without hesitation in all things.

But John's attention does not remain on these angelic beings, as glorious as they are.

His attention is once again drawn to the Church.

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 church militant on earth struggles to obey the will of the LORD. We all fall short in many ways.

But, the Church Victorious, surrounding the throne of our Holy LORD, will no longer struggle with disobedience. Just as much as these angels unceasingly give praise to the holiness of God and obey his will in all things, so will the Church in glory perfectly obey Him.

Every time the angels give praise to the LORD, the 24 elders follow suit.

In glory, we will perfectly, and eternally, worship our LORD.

I believe this picture describes what I like to call “formal and corporate” worship. It is the highest form of worship, and it is an activity that we will practice throughout all eternity.

That is not to say that this is the only activity we will do throughout all eternity. We will be interacting with the new creation and with one another as well.

But any view of eternity that does not have formal corporate worship at the center is misguided.

The Church will cast their crowns down before the LORD.

The crowns are one way of depicting the reward for the endurance of the Church in this life.

The fact that these crowns are cast before the LORD is an acknowledgment that this endurance was the fruit of God’s grace, through the working of the Holy Spirit.

We only have to offer God what He has first given to us.

The LORD is worthy of all glory and honor and power. He has not used His power wrongly. He has done all things well.

The Church finally acknowledges the reason for her existence.

We were made by You. And we exist for You.

So, what is the purpose of chapter 4.

1. It gives us a clear picture of God’s sovereign rule over His creation.
2. It gives us a clear picture of the Church in her final victorious state.
 - a. The Church is holy and pure.
 - b. The Church alive.
 - c. The Church is complete.
 - d. The Church perfectly worships.
 - e. The Church perfectly obeys.
 - f. The Church is experiencing peace and rest.

Right now, we struggle.

We are fighting to live by faith in Jesus Christ.

We are striving to obey God and to worship Him.

We are fighting to not be conformed to the world around us.

We are earnestly endeavoring to maintain the truth of the Gospel.

We are weak and often suffering.

But after these things: whenever we personally die or whenever the LORD returns, all our hopes will be realized.

No more struggle against sin.

No more resistance within your heart to the will of God.

Eternal fellowship with God in perfect peace.

And when the heavenly throne descends upon the New Creation, the will of God will be “done on earth as it is done in heaven”.

John is not giving you a strange picture of a heavenly throne to scare you. He is wanting to encourage you. He wants you to find peace and courage to help you in your time of need.

He wants you to know that this reality “must” take place. It must take place because the LORD is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. But it also must take place because the Church Victorious has been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ.

But that will have to wait until next week, when we see the glory of the Lamb who was slain.