

Revelation Four (vv.5-11)

The Seven Lamps of Fire [v.5]

v.5. Heaven is in session. There is no longer a throne of *grace*, but a throne of *judgment* as indicated by “lightnings and thunderings” proceeding “out of the throne”. A God of infinite righteousness is about to act in judgment upon a rebellious earth. The scene is reminiscent of Sinai – the standards of divine righteousness have not changed since the giving of the Law. A huge thunderstorm provides the background (cf. 8.5; 11.19; 16.18, 21) being a manifestation of God’s displeasure and an illustration of the terror of facing His judgment. The word “voices” refers to the sounds or noises created by the tempest. Before the throne stand “seven lamps [*lampas*] of fire” which illustrate the plenitude and fulness of the power of the Holy Spirit (Zechariah 4.2, 6). The reference to the Spirit suggests He is the executor of the righteous judgments of the throne. Torches emit a blazing and fierce light rather than a calm and soft one – again symbolic of the fierceness of divine wrath. This is a far cry from the appearance of the Spirit as a *dove* (Luke 3.22) and *cloven tongues* (Acts 2.3).

The Sea of Glass [v.6a]

v.6. In addition to the Holy Spirit, a “sea of glass” also stands “*before* the throne”. On this occasion, the sea of glass appears to be vacant. In the only other reference to the sea (15.2) it is filled with a host of tribulation martyrs. It is likely this same sea of glass is described in slightly different terms in other visions of the throne of God. Moses saw “under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness” (Exodus 24.10). Ezekiel saw a “firmament... as the colour of the terrible crystal”, or “over the heads of the living beings was something like a platform, glittering awesomely like ice, stretched out over their heads” (NET, Ezekiel 1.22). The sea was “like unto crystal” which is lauded for its clarity and magnificent brightness (22.1). This word “crystal” describes rock crystal of perfect transparency and beauty. The sea would therefore seem to symbolise a fixed state of purity that represents the character of God and defines the purposes (actions) of the throne. These purposes are fixed and eternal, unlike the restless, storm-tossed seas of earth (Isaiah 57.20). “Holiness has its settled home there” (Newberry). The sea clearly reflects and radiates the glory of God through the throne room of heaven. The sea may also represent an impassable barrier – a ‘ceiling’ for the created universe and the ‘floor’ of heaven (cf. Ezekiel 1.22). Nothing can enter the presence of God casually or easily, yet this sea will yet be populated by human beings redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (15.2-4). The sheer enormity of the ultimate number of redeemed may be indicated by contrasting the “sea” of glass with the “lake” of fire.

The Significance of the Living Creatures [vv.6b-8]

The word “beast” describes an animal or, more generally, a living being (the word *thērion* will be used later in the book to describe ‘wild’ beasts). The four living creatures are very similar, if not identical, to the cherubim of Ezekiel (1.4-14; 10.12, 14). “In the midst of the throne and round about the throne” seems to suggest the living creatures were in the immediate vicinity of the throne, encircling it on all sides – on the *left* and the *right*, *before* and in *front*. They form the inner circle closest to the throne and are possibly in motion around it (cf. Ezekiel 1.12).

The living creatures are leaders of the heavenly court and represent the highest order of celestial beings. They seem to execute and participate in the administration of divine justice (6.1, 3, 5, 7). As the following verses will show, they are symbolic of the living creation which displays the character and attributes of God Himself. Before his fall, Satan was an anointed guardian cherub responsible to attend the throne of God (Ezekiel 28.14, 16). Being “full of eyes before and behind” indicates vigilance and knowledge as those zealous for the honour of God (cf. Ezekiel 1.18; 10.12). Though they are not omniscient, nothing escapes their scrutiny.

v.7. In Ezekiel, each living creature has *four* faces, but here, each has a *different* face. John is using simile – the creatures are not to be identified *as* a lion, ox, human being or eagle, instead they share a likeness [*homoion*] with them. The whole of the earthly, animate creation is represented and reflects the attributes of God as He acts in judgment on the earth: *sovereignty* (lion), *strength* (ox), *sense* or intelligence (man) and *speed* (eagle). Although not the focus here, the character of God is best revealed in Christ. FC Jennings, “*Each of the four pictures we have of Him in the four gospels portrays Him as one of these life-forms. In Matthew He expresses that royal majesty so perfectly figured in the king of beasts. In Mark we love to trace the patient path of the perfect servant, to picture whom God has made the young ox, ready alike for labour or sacrifice. Closer, and still dearer, does He come to us in Luke, looking into our faces with human eyes filled with compassion and sympathy; it is the face of a man till, finally, we fall in adoring worship at His feet as we follow Him in John's gospel, where He, as it were soars far out of sight of the merely natural eyes, and is indeed as a flying eagle.*”

v.8. The further description of the living creatures with “six wings” draws parallels with the *seraphim* of Isaiah 6 (v.2). If the eyes represent *vigilance*, then the wings speak of *speed*. They *swiftly* fly to execute God’s commands with reverence (covered face) and humility (covered feet) – they stand on holy ground and cannot look on the unveiled glory of God without being consumed. “Full of eyes within” (or ‘round about and within’, JND) may describe their wings as also being covered with eyes including the undersides (see Ezekiel 1.10). Nothing can escape the gaze of these beings. Since there is no night in heaven (22.5), the phrase “day and night” is metaphorical language describing what is *incessant*. Their praise is offered without interruption whenever they are not otherwise engaged in carrying out God’s will (RL Thomas).

The cry of the living creatures is “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.” God is *thrice* (repeated for emphasis) holy [*hagios*]. God the Father is holy (John 17.11), the Lord Jesus is “that holy thing” (Luke 1.35), and the Spirit of God is the “Holy Spirit”. The word “holy” means to be *set apart* – God is distinct in His holiness from a creation tainted by sin. This holiness is about to be manifested in judgment on the earth. “Lord God Almighty” describes God’s unlimited power, especially exhibited in universal judgment (cf. 11.17; 15.3; 16.7; 19.6). “Which was, and is, and is to come” describes God in terms of time. Though He is timeless He is in full control of past, present and future. The switch in order of the statements (from 1.4, 8) may be because this chapter emphasises the creative activity of God.

This verse begins an oratorio of worship which begins with the hymn of *creation* (4.8-11) and moves to a hymn of *redemption* (5.9-13). The hymns begin with a *quartet* (4.8) before expanding to include the *twenty-four elders* (4.10). In 5.8, *harps* are added to the vocal praise before the rest of the *angels* add their voices (5.11). Finally, *every creature* in the universe joins in the mighty chorus (5.13). Note also that this whole section is peppered with *triads* – the stamp of deity.

The Song of the Elders [vv.9-11]

v.9. The elders await the signal of the four living creatures before proceeding with their tribute, as indicated by the phrase “and whenever” (NET). The song of v.8 is described as giving “glory” (recognition of inherent excellence), “honour” (worthiness to receive praise) and “thanks” (gratitude in view of creation) to God who is further described as the one who “liveth for ever and ever” (cf. Daniel 4.34; 12.7). Unlike them, God is eternal and His life underived. **v.10.** The elders “fall down” or ‘prostrate’ themselves before God in devotion and worship. The casting down of the “crowns” suggests the administrative function of this heavenly court is concluding. Any rule or responsibility they once had is given back to God. Another is about to take the reins of divine rule over the universe. But who is worthy for such a feat? Who can legally and legitimately lay claim to the earth and its dominion? The suspense is building! **v.11.** The elders first speak of the worthiness of God to receive the worship they are about to offer. The word “worthy” [*axios*] occurs seven times in Revelation. It was used in the political language of the day to refer to the Roman emperor when he marched in triumphal procession. Ultimately, only God is worthy (deserving) of worship. Like the worship of the living creatures (v.9), the elders also ascribe “glory” and “honour” to God with the addition of the word “power”. Albert Barnes says, “*Man can confer no power on God, but he may acknowledge that which he has, and adore him for its exertion in his behalf and in the government of the world.*” God’s power has been displayed in creation for He has “created all things”, a comprehensive way of referring to things in the heavens, on the earth and in the sea (cf. 10.6). They were created for His “pleasure”, or rather ‘because of’ His will [RV]. The reason for the very existence of creation lies simply in the will of God.

Both the living creatures and elders are worshipping God by expressing their appreciation for *who* He is and *what* He has done. The more we appreciate the greatness of our God, the more we will be caused to abdicate the thrones of our lives, remove the crowns from our own heads, and prostrate ourselves in worshipful service before the Lord.