

Finally Home: What Heaven Means for Earth Glory

Revelation 4

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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."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.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, 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." Revelation 4 (ESV)

I want for you to think with me about the most beautiful place you've ever visited. Think of a place where the view, the colors, the smells, the sounds, and the magnitude were so stunning that you still have it pictured in your mind. What's more, you have it lodged in your heart. Got your place?

Now what words would you use to describe that location and scene? Maybe: breath-taking, amazing, beautiful, inspiring, unbelievable? I would guess that you might struggle coming up with the right word to use because words in those situations do not hold enough weight. They do not convey the whole meaning.

You may have experienced this tension when you are showing someone pictures of the place that you visited. And while pictures partially share the experience with someone, you will likely find yourself either thinking or actually saying, "You know... you just had to be there." While a picture is worth a thousand words, it still isn't sufficient for what it is to experience beauty, grandeur, and power first hand.

If you could see into heaven, what words do you think you would use? In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul said that when he "was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell" (2 Corinthians 12:4 – NLT). In other words, there were not sufficient words to describe what happened. When the Apostle John was exiled on the island of Patmos when he received instruction to write what he saw, and that became to book of Revelation. John tried his best to capture what he saw, and if you read the book of Revelation words like power, honor, mystery,

and worship certainly emerge. But if we only could choose one word to describe heaven, it would be the word “glory.”

Why Glory?

Last week we talked about what it means to seek the things that are above and to set our minds on things above from Colossians 3. Although the passage is not specifically a description of heaven, it does point toward developing a heavenly mind-set – to ask ourselves “If heaven is like that, how should I live now?” Hopefully you found yourself a little more “heaven-aware” this week or maybe you started a conversation with someone about heaven or perhaps you are visiting today because you are trying to figure out what heaven is all about.

I wanted to set your sights last Sunday on where to look. But this Sunday I want for you to consider what you would see. And that is where the word “glory” comes into play because I think it is the singular most important word as it relates to heaven, and I also think that there are sweeping implications of this word right now.

In the Bible, the word “glory” includes weightiness and beauty. Glory is both frightening and exhilarating. It is serious and amazingly attractive. A few examples:

- Moses desired to see the glory of God in Exodus 33:18, and he was put in the cleft of the rock as God’s glory passed by.
- The Psalms are filled with the word “glory,” denoting his power: ³ *The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters.* Psalm 29:3 (ESV).
- Isaiah saw something of the glory of God in Isaiah 6 as he heard “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory,” and his response was utter brokenness – “Woe is me! For I am lost.”
- John in his gospel introduces Jesus as the Word saying, “*we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, fully of grace and truth*” (John 1:14).
- The Apostle Paul describes the condition of sinful mankind in Romans 3:23 as “*all have sinned and fall short the glory of God.*”
- The book of Revelation uses the word “glory” seventeen times. I’d encourage you to do a search sometime and look up all the references. It is a wonderful study. Of all the verses, I think the seminal text is 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.* Revelation 21:10–11 (ESV)

When you put all of this together, it is very clear that “glory” is a word that is central to who God is, what He is like, and it characterizes the realm of His existence. You could think of “glory” as expressing the “other-ness” of God and the supreme uniqueness of His essence. It is the best word to describe the weightiness of who He is, the power of His rule as God, and the beauty of what makes Him God. There is nothing more attractive, inspiring, and frightening as the glory of God.

In fact, I believe that one of the great joys of heaven will be seeing this glory, realizing how other-worldly it is, and how undeserving we are to see it. Heaven will be filled with unending praise from God's people because of the immensity of his glory and the depth of his grace.

If I only was allowed one word to describe heaven, the word I would choose would be glory.

What is in Revelation 4?

Our text this morning is Revelation 4, and I've chosen it because it is the first scene that John sees in his vision. It is first for a reason. John gets a glimpse into the heavenly realm, where God dwells. And it helps us understand something about heaven and this idea of glory.

I don't know if you have read or studied Revelation before, but it is a wonderful and challenging book. It was written to churches who were facing very challenging times. Persecution was starting, and John is given instruction to write "the things you have seen, the things that are and those things that are to take place after this" (Revelation 1:19). So this book is not only about the future, it also gives us a picture of what is happening even now in the heavenly places.

Revelation is a challenging book to interpret because it uses apocalyptic language. One has to determine what in the text has purely symbolic meaning and what should be taken literally. And while you consider those interpretive questions, it is really important to remember that the ultimate message in Revelation is the triumph of God through Christ. Revelation is the story of restoration of the creation and mankind back to God's glory through the sacrifice of Jesus.

What do we see in Revelation regarding God's glory?

The Display of God's Glory (vv. 1-3)

In Revelation 4 John is welcomed into the throne room of heaven where we first see God's glory on display. After the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 1-3, John receives a summons to see another realm through a door that is opened in heaven.

The voice that summoned him was the same voice that he heard in Revelation 1:10 which told him to write down what he saw and send it to the seven churches. This voice is the voice of Jesus, and in chapter 1 it segues into a glorified vision of Him where he is clothed in a long robe with a golden sash. His hair was white like wool, His eyes were like fire, His feet like bronze, His voice like the roar of many waters, in His hand were seven stars, a sword came out of his mouth, and his face was like the sun (Revelation 1:12-16). John's response in chapter one was to fall at his feet as though he were dead. That is what happened the last time he heard this voice.

Now he heard it again, but this time it ushers him into a heavenly realm. He is invited to "Come up here..." into a world beyond the one that John knows. He is given a glimpse of what it is like to be in God's presence. John is brought into heaven and what he sees is real. However, let me give you two cautions: 1) This is a description of God's presence and therefore it would be permissible to call it heaven, but the point of this passage is not to give us details of what it will be like in heaven in the future.

2) John is going to use language to describe something indescribable with images that have meaning beyond the details.

In verse two we see that the first thing mentioned is a throne. “... behold, a throne stood in heaven with one seated on the throne” (Rev 4:2). John sees the throne room from which God himself rules and reigns. This is the sacred and hallowed place from which the entire universe is governed and controlled.

Then John attempts to describe the scene around the throne. He identifies that he who sat on the throne had the appearance of jasper and carnelian stones. Jasper is a gem of various colors, and it is included in the high priest’s breastplate in Exodus 28:20 and is used to describe the glory of New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:11). We use words like gold or diamonds to capture this reality (e.g., “The clouds looked like gold” or “The night sky was filled with diamonds”). These gems are an attempt to describe indescribable beauty.

Finally, there was a rainbow around the throne that had an emerald like appearance. A rainbow has enormous significance in the Bible as it was the divinely given symbol of God’s mercy in His promise to never destroy the world with a flood again (Genesis 9:14). So the stunning display of God’s glory is matched with a the most significant symbol of mercy apart from the cross.

Don’t miss the fact that the first thing John sees is this scene. His first view of heaven is a display of God’s glory. And the reason it is first is because there is nothing more important or central than the glory of God – both in heaven and on earth.

According to the Apostle Paul in Romans 1, the essence of sin is exchanging the glory of the immortal God for our own glory or a glory of our own making. So, the glory of God matters right now because sin and disobedience is the pursuit of the counterfeit glory.

What’s more, the beauty of heaven is being able to see the most beautiful reality of all realities: the glory of God. Everything in creation points to this other-world glory. Jonathan Edwards famously said it this way:

To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Better than fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of any, or all earthly friends. These are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.¹

I would suggest to you right now that I think that you can nearly sum up the essence of what it means to be Christian by what one does with the beauty of God’s glory. The difference between a believer and unbeliever is what he or she thinks and feels about the glory of God. Sin is defined as falling short of the glory of God – it is wanting your own glory over and against the glory of God. The essential difference between a person who is headed toward heaven and a person who is headed to hell is their disposition to

¹ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/75887.Jonathan_Edwards

the glory of God. The wonder of the cross is that it made it possible to be brought back to the glory of God.

The apostle Paul makes a tragic and sober statement about the scheme of the devil as it relates to people in the world and the glory of God. Here is what he said:

³ *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* 2 Corinthians 4:3–4 (ESV)

How do you pray for a person who is on the wrong path spiritually? You pray that they would have eyes to see the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ. And if you are a believer, you should never get over the wonder and the beauty that Paul also says:

⁶ *For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.* 2 Corinthians 4:6 (ESV)

Oh may you never lose the wonder that God shone the brightness of His light into your life such that you saw the glory of God in the person of Jesus! Revelation 4 is important because it identifies what makes heaven so wonderful, appealing, and beautiful. It shows us the attractiveness of God, and it is not an accident that the first thing that John sees is the display of God’s glory. Heaven is heaven because God is glorious.

Centrality of God’s Glory (vv. 4-7)

The scene in Revelation 4 continues, but it shifts from a focus only on the throne and the one seated on the throne to what is happening around the throne. The glory of God is not only on display, but it also is central in the scene. This too is by design and has significant meaning. Let’s get a sense of what John sees.

In verse four we learn that around the throne are twenty-four thrones and there are twenty-four elders sitting on them with white garments and crowns on their heads. We are not sure who these elders are or what exactly they represent. At a minimum it is intended to be a courtroom scene, and the fact that there are twenty-four may have something to do with the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples, symbolizing a linkage between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

From the throne (v. 5) there are flashes of lightening, rumblings, and peals of thunder. On earth these are powerful and potentially frightening acts of nature. And in the Bible, they have been a part of God’s presence, especially at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19). There is important symbolism here.

Additionally, around the throne are seven torches which we are told are the seven spirits of God, likely angelic beings which are sent out in all the earth in Revelation 5:6.² And before the throne was a sea of glass, like crystal. This beautiful floor of heaven is described on other visions of God’s presence such as

² Some take this to mean the Holy Spirit with his seven-fold ministry in Isaiah 11:2.

Exodus 24, Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 15. It seems to accentuate and reflect the glory of God while being the barrier between heaven and earth.

The scene also includes four creatures who take their position on each side of the throne. They are described in a way that is highly symbolic and mysterious. Each creature is full of eyes in the front and behind, picturing their alertness, knowledge, and that nothing escapes their notice.³ What's more these creatures have the likeness of a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. They serve as the worship leaders in the scene. More on that later.

For now, however, just note how everything in this scene revolves around the centrality of God's glory. The twenty-four thrones, the crystal floor, the four creatures and the powerful sounds emanating from the throne all meant to focus our attention on the centrality of God's glory. We saw in the last point that there is nothing more attractive and awe-inspiring than God's glory, and here we see that there is nothing more important.

Two weeks from now we'll unpack Revelation 21, but New Jerusalem portrays the same centrality by identifying that in the new heaven and the new earth there will be no need for the sun. What could be more central to our life than the sun? Verse 23 says that there is no need for the sun or the moon because "the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb." Don't miss this! The life-giving sun, the center of our universe, has been replaced by the glory of God.

The apostle Paul picks up on the centrality of God's glory when he wrote to the church at Colossae and told them this about Jesus:

¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. Colossians 1:16–18 (ESV)

The centrality of God's glory is evident in the preeminence of Jesus Christ. Do you remember the question that I've asked you to consider in this series: "If heaven is like that, how should I live now?" Well, if God's glory is central in heaven and if the glory of God is the most valuable thing in the universe, can you ask yourself today if that glory is really valuable to you? Do you love the preeminence of Jesus? Is the glory of God a primary motivator for you?

How you view and value God's glory is very determinative. For instance, Romans 8:18 tells us that it changes how we view suffering: "*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*" Even now we are being transformed into that glory: "*... are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another... (2 Cor 4:4-6).*" 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, "*... whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.*"

³ Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 139

A central aspect of heaven is the glory of God. It is not only beautiful and compelling, but it also is central – to heaven and to everything. And when the glory of God is seen for what it is, there is a typical response, and we see that in verses 8-11.

Response to God's Glory (vv. 8-11)

This scene in heaven involves some particular responses that are instructive at many levels. As we look at them take note how the glory of God creates, even demands, a certain kind of action upon those who are near.

In verse eight we are told again that the four living creatures have eyes all around and within, but we also read that they have six wings. In Isaiah 6 the cherubim around God's throne also had six wings, two of which covered their faces, two covered their feet, and with two they flew. It is like the same vision in Revelation 4.

The other similarity between Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 is that these creatures call out God's praise. In Revelation 4 the text says that "*day and night they never cease to say: 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'*" (Rev 4:8). This unending chorus captures both the holiness and the eternity of God. This statement is a distillation of what makes God, God. The four creatures are praising God for who He is. They are exulting in His glory.

Worship then spreads outside of the proximity of the throne as the twenty-four elders are involved again. Remember that the four creatures serve as worship leaders. Their focus is on who God is, and the twenty-four elders respond to their praise. Verses 9-10 tell us that as the creatures give glory, honor and thanks to God, the elders join in worship.

The elders fall down before the throne. They prostrate themselves before the Lord, laying before Him in humility as they worship Him. Incidentally, I wonder if you know this position of prayer and humility. In times of great humility, testing, or worship it is a position of prayer that I have used which fit with the condition of my heart. If God is like that, how should we respond even now?

The elders also cast their crowns before the throne. These crowns were symbols of their honor and authority in verse 4. As they take these crowns and cast them before the throne, they are freely returning the honor that has been given to them. They are acknowledging that their honor should be given back to the one who is worthy of universal honor.⁴ They take the gifts of God and cast them before throne in humble recognition that God is supreme over everything, including delegated authority and honor.

Take note here as to how we ought to think about anything that constitutes as a gift: positions of honor, talents that God has given, the money that He has provided, and authority in life. Any "glory" you receive in this lifetime needs to be seen as delegated authority – it is from God. And it also needs to be seen as a gift that should be given back to God in worship. Can you imagine twenty-three elders falling down while one remained seated and clutched his crown because he loved it too much? It is unthinkable

⁴ Mounce, 139.

in this scene, and should be equally so in our lives. One of the sure remedies to dealing with pride in our hearts is to get a bigger vision of who God really is. I pray that even now that happens in your soul.

Finally, we hear what these elders say as they cast their crowns before the throne. They join in the praise of God around the throne by saying “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” (Rev 4:11). This statement is directed specifically to God. The elders are talking to God directly and extolling God’s worth, honor, power, creation, and omnipotence.

If heaven is like this, then it impacts even how we act each Lord’s day as we worship together. It means that the primary orientation and focus of what we are doing – from how we sing, how we greet one another, how we pray, how I preach, and how you listen – is on God himself. Anyone up front is merely the prompter, you as a congregation are the participants and God is the audience. Sunday is the gathering of God’s people before the face of God. It means that we are gathering to re-orient our lives on the beauty, the supremacy, and the glory of God. Sunday morning services point us toward another realm and another reality. The goal of preaching, the goal of singing, the goal of praying is to help us to “*ascribe to the Lord, the glory due his name*” (Psalm 29:2).

This worship continues into the next chapter. In chapter five the worship moves beyond the four creatures and the twenty-four elders to include the voice of many angels – myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands (5:11). And the praise of chapter five also includes the entrance of a slain Lamb in the midst of the throne – a clear image of Jesus Christ.

Part of the beauty of Revelation 4 is the fact that the response, the worship, and the praise continue and expand. John has been introduced to the realm of God, and he witnessed the glory God expressed through the events in this throne room. The glory of God was the first thing he encountered as he walked through the door into heaven. The glory of God is that important both in heaven and on earth.

So, if you were asked what one word describes the essence of heaven and the realm of God’s existence, I would hope that you would say “glory.” But I also hope that this category not only informs how you think about heaven, but also how you live now. Revelation 4 gives us a window into heaven to see what the glory of God is like, and this vision calls us to marvel, to worship, and respond to his glory even now.

¹ *Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory...* Psalm 115:1 (ESV)

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