

Text: Revelation 4:1-11 (Pew Bible, pg.1218)

Title: “That Place Called Heaven”

INTRODUCTION

Before I get started this morning I want to remind you that this series on heaven is taking us through Easter. We have a great Easter planned as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. Additionally we have a guest with us that day with a testimony of the power of the Cross and the resurrection. Brooks Douglass is a former state senator in Oklahoma who has produced a feature-length film entitled “Heaven’s Rain.” It’s the story of the tragic murder of his parents and the power Christ gave him to forgive those who hurt his family. Please bring friends and family with you. It’s a life-changing message.

ILLUSTRATION - I received an email last week from one of our members about the sermon series on heaven. He wrote: “I find so much freedom, peace, happiness and love in the fact that: 1. Christ has delivered me from my past identity, 2. Christ has delivered for me a new position. 3. Christ has insured for me a glorious future. Knowing that everyday I live in pain, I find peace and pain-free thought in the fact that in the day of the Lord, I will have no pain. Pastor, that is so exiting, that puts a smile on my face.”

The knowledge of heaven in our heads and a vision for heaven in our hearts gives us strength to face the trials of this life.

Now let’s turn to Revelation 4:1. Here we’re going to see what the Lord wants us to know about heaven from this amazing revelation received by the Apostle John. This great leader of the early church had been sent off into exile by the Roman emperor to an island called Patmos. God gave John the revelation we have contained in this book. The Revelation was addressed to believers in a world that was very dangerous. Just as John suffered and could have been executed at any time, so could be the case for those who first received this revelation. It was a word of encouragement to sustain them in their sufferings. Now I want to take this chapter one verse at a time, and connect some other passages with it, and along the way to point out some of the features of heaven. Let me remind you that what we are looking at today is what we might call the “present heaven,” as it exists now. There will be a day after the second coming of Jesus Christ when things will be different. But now, when a believer dies, we can expect to see, hear and experience certain features of heaven.

Revelation 4:1 - After this I 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 said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

John was to go somewhere to a place. The angels said “come up here.” And in that place God would show him some important things. Here’s the first feature about heaven. Very simply...

1. HEAVEN IS REAL.

Heaven is a real place. It is not an invisible realm that exists only in our imagination. It’s not a figurative place; it is a literal place.

The night before Jesus was crucified He spoke comforting words to His disciples ... words that we often use today to comfort people when they are grieving over the death of a loved one or friend:

John 14:2 - In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.

John 14:3 - And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

So Jesus talks about heaven as a real place. And Jesus wants us to be with Him in that place for eternity. He said, "I'll come back and take you with me to this place I've prepared." What if we said to our loved ones and friends who don't know the Lord, "I'm going to heaven and I can't bear to think that you won't be going there with me."

The Bible says that heaven is where Christ came from when He came to earth, and it's where He returned at what we call the Ascension, after He was crucified and resurrected. As the disciples were watching Jesus disappear two angels stood beside them and said...

Acts 1:11 - "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

So in Revelation 4 John was taken up into this heaven and shown certain things that we have recorded here in Revelation. Now you may or may not be able to trust the accounts of people who claim to have gone to heaven and to have seen things. What we have recorded for us here is the trustworthy, reliable, inerrant Scripture which we may believe without question. No other book about heaven can claim that, and therefore this Book is our only reliable guide to the features of heaven.

ILLUSTRATION – A few years ago our whole family went to Disney World for Christmas. And because there's so much to see and do there we bought the official guidebook for Disney World, and we went on their website to know exactly what was there, how to get in and what to see once we got there. Well there's a real place called heaven and the only reliable guidebook for who's there, what's there and how to get there is the Bible.

Now as we read further we see some of the features of heaven. And one of them is that there is throne. John said...

Revelation 4:2 - At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

So here's another thing about heaven ...

2. HEAVEN IS ROYAL.

Heaven is a *real* place and heaven is a *royal* place, because the King of Glory dwells there. Now we're not told here whose throne it is, but later we're told that the One who sits on the throne of heaven is none other than our Heavenly Father.

Let me say just one more thing about these features of heaven. Every feature of heaven reminds us of what is true about God and about the redemption that we have from Him.

Revelation 4:2 - At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

Notice that John said in v.2 that He was "in the Spirit." Now as I understand it, the way humans enter the present heaven today is in their spirit. When I die, my body will go into the ground and await the resurrection that will occur when Jesus comes back. But the moment I die my spirit, that invisible me, goes into heaven where God and Christ are. However, that doesn't mean that heaven is only a spiritual place where invisible beings exist. Jesus, who is now in heaven, has a glorified body. When Christ returns our bodies will be raised out of the grave and united with our spirit in a new glorified body. I've joked with my funeral director friends that I would like to just rent a burial place. I won't need it forever. But for now a person who dies goes in their spirit to heaven to be in the presence of the Lord.

Now John is not the only one in the Bible to have had this experience. The Apostle Paul was also permitted to go into heaven to observe things. He tells about in II Cor.12.

2 Corinthians 12:2 - I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows.

2 Corinthians 12:4 – (He) was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

Now what is this "third heaven?" It is the realm where God the Father, Christ and the saints exist today. The first heaven is the atmospheric realm that immediately surrounds our earth where birds and airplanes fly. The second heaven is the astronomic realm of planets and galaxies. And the third heaven is authoritative realm where God reigns upon His throne. So out there beyond our vast universe is this real, royal place.

Paul calls this place "paradise," which is the same word Jesus used when He was speaking to the man who repented just before being crucified next to Jesus on the Cross: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Paradise is a word used often in the Bible to describe heaven.

So heaven is a royal place where the throne of God is located. This throne is the central feature of heaven. Eleven times here in Revelation 4 John mentions the throne of God. But there's something important here that we don't want to miss.

Revelation 4:2 - There ... was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

Someone was sitting on the throne of heaven. That's important to notice. God is never away from the control center of the universe. He is reigning and ruling today over all the affairs of your life. Count on it! You may think that things are swirling out of control in your life. Things are happening to you and you wonder if there is any meaning or purpose. You need to know that there's a throne, the control-center of the universe, including your life. And someone is seated on that throne.

Now John zooms out and sees more:

Revelation 4:3 - And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.

Here's the next feature of heaven...

3. HEAVEN IS RADIANT.

Heaven is a real place, a royal place and a radiant place.

Revelation 4:5 - From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.

Revelation 4:6a - Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

I won't spend much time on this except to say that the brilliance and radiance of heaven merely reflects the glory of God. John cannot immediately see who was on the throne ... like he was looking right into the sun. All He can see is blinding light. Just imagine the radiant colors of heaven that John can only describe by comparing them to things known to him ... precious gems, a full rainbow, lightning exploding from a thunderstorm and a sea that is sparkling brilliantly like a sea of glass that reflects the flashes of light and color that come from the throne. We're talking here about the radiance of the glory of God.

Listen, heaven is not a place of mist and fog. We've got plenty of that in this world. There's so much darkness and so much gray in our lives. Won't it be great to be in a place that is this spectacularly radiant with the glory of God?

Now back up to v.4. We don't want to skip that verse.

Revelation 4:4 - Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.

Now these characters, the twenty-four elders, are very important. They are seen repeatedly in Revelation. But who are they? Many scholars believe that these twenty-four elders represent the OT and NT people of God. The OT people of God were the twelve tribes of Israel, and the NT people of God are built on the foundation of the twelve apostles of Jesus. Twelve plus twelve equals twenty-four.

So that points to the next feature of heaven.

4. HEAVEN IS A RESIDENCE.

Remember Jesus said...

John 14:2 - In my Father's house are many rooms...

So Jesus calls heaven "my Father's house..." The word means a dwelling place. So it is not only the residence of God, but it has rooms for people. The great preacher D.L. Moody said that heaven is a prepared place for prepared people. Not everyone goes to heaven when they die. The Bibles says...

Revelation 21:27 - Nothing impure will ever enter it (heaven), nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Those whose names are written in the "Lamb's book of life" are those who been saved, who have put their trust in Christ alone for the gift of eternal life.

Now I will come back to these *human residents* of heaven, and who they are. But before I do I want you to notice that there are *angelic residents* in heaven. **Read Revelation 4:6b-8.**

Now these four living creatures are apparently a high order of angelic beings. Now angels in heaven are servants of Almighty God. And God dispenses them to attend to the needs of His people. For example, Jesus talked about the angels who are watching over children.

Matthew 18:10 - "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

Jesus talked about the fact that marriage in heaven will not be what it is here in this life.

Matthew 22:30 - At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

I'll talk more about marriage in heaven in another message. But there's also great rejoicing in heaven.

Luke 15:10 - In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The angels will play a prominent role in the return of Christ from heaven and the gathering of the church from all over the world back to heaven.

Matthew 25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.

So there are these angelic residents in heaven. Now let's go back to the human residents of heaven represented by the twenty-four elders.

Revelation 4:4 - Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.

So there are smaller thrones upon which the twenty-four elders sit. That indicates that they have some measure of authority. And they are dressed in white signifying their purity and their victory. And they have crowns, which were the crowns given to those who were victorious in the Greek games.

Revelation 7 gives us another glimpse of the human residents of heaven at this particular point. John in his vision sees this.

Revelation 7:9 - After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

That's the population of heaven. And we read on in Revelation 7 how they explode with praise to God for the salvation that they have that is in Jesus Christ.

And in John's vision in Revelation 4, all the heavenly residents ... angels and humans ... join together in a great chorus of praise to God. Stand as I read this. Let's just let it take our breath away! **Read Revelation 4:9-11.**

ILLUSTRATION – Randy Alcorn, in his book on Heaven, tells the story of Florence Chadwick who, in 1952 attempted to swim the 26 miles from Catalina Island to the shore of California. The day was cold and foggy ... so much so that she could barely see the boats that were accompanying her to support her on her swim. After about 15 hours of swimming Florence Chadwick was exhausted and begged to be taken out of the water. Her mother, who was in one of the boats cruising alongside her, told Florence that she only had a short way to go and that she could make it if she just kept swimming. Florence tried, but just didn't have the strength to continue. When they pulled her back into the boat she discovered that she was only a half-mile from land on the California coast ... so close. Later she said, "All I could see was the fog....I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."

Friends for us as believers the "shore" is Jesus Christ and being with Him forever in a place called heaven. Some days the fog of confusion and sorrow and weakness in life is so thick we just want to quit. But if we can keep looking to the day when we will forever be in His presence face to face, we can make it.