

## JOHN'S VISION OF THE THRONE

### *Revelation 4*

Review briefly what is known about the apostle John and his situation at the time the visions of the book of Revelation were given.

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#### **Doctrinal Points**

*Spiritual warfare is going on all the time in this world.*

*Divine providence, by means of the truths of the Word, protects the good and separates them from the evil.*

*The Lord is the only judge.*

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#### **Notes for Parents**

The book of Revelation is the final book of the Word of God. It is also sometimes called the Apocalypse, which is just the Greek work for revelation. It is the record of a long and wonderful vision which was given to the apostle John when he was a very old man, probably ninety years old. Tradition says that he was the only one of the apostles—except Judas, who hanged himself from remorse—who did not die a martyr's death, because both the leaders of Judaism and the Roman government were afraid of the growing Christian Church and tried to stamp it out. John was not put to death, but he was exiled to the little island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor, where the vision was given him.

The word *revelation* means an “unveiling.” John says that when this vision was given him, he was “in the spirit,” and he was told to write “the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.” So this book is first of all a description of spiritual conditions, states which exist in the hearts and minds of men, and it is a prophecy of what these states will inevitably lead to.

It is such a strange and powerful vision that it has always captured the imaginations of men and led them to try to think what it can mean, and many things in it have been applied at one time or another to events which have been taking place in the world, especially to great wars and battles, for all through the book conflicts are described. But we should realize that all these things are given us as symbolic pictures of a spiritual conflict which goes on all the time, the conflict between good and evil in our hearts and between truth and falsity in our minds. It is a picture of judgment given to show us the inevitable results of evil and falsity and to help us choose what is good and true.

The chapter the children have for today sets the stage for this great conflict, for it shows us that in heaven it is the Lord who reigns and that everyone and everything there loves to acknowledge and worship Him.

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### Primary

The children will be interested in John and in the vision itself; so the reading of the chapter should come early in the lesson. They may remember the word *cherubim* in our study of Ezekiel and should be reminded of it. Tell them the colors of the precious stones mentioned and connect verse 8 with its use in the church service.

The Lord when He was on earth chose twelve of His disciples to receive special instructions and powers from Him so that after He left them they could go out all over the world and preach the Gospel—the “good news”—that He had overcome evil and would give to all who would learn of Him and obey Him the power to overcome their temptations and become heavenly people. These twelve men were called the apostles, which means men “sent out.” The three apostles who were closest to the Lord were Peter, James, and John. All the apostles except Judas were faithful, and did the work the Lord had given them to do.

The apostle who apparently lived longest was John. He is believed to have lived to be nearly ninety and he was in charge of

several of the early churches. Before he died he was given a wonderful vision of what would happen to this new church which was called Christian. We have been studying this vision as described in the book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible.

First John saw the Lord as He may be seen in the heavens, and he recognized Him as the same Lord he had known and followed on earth.

Then he was shown how everyone is judged according to the truth which is in the Word.

Our lesson today is the beginning of this vision of the judgment.

Read the chapter and then see how many of the details of the vision you can remember.

Do you remember our lesson about Ezekiel's vision?

Nearly seven hundred years before John, Ezekiel had seen some of the same things.

The "beasts" [KJV] in our chapter are the same "living creatures" seen by Ezekiel.

They are also called *cherubim*.

We can easily see that the Lord himself was the king sitting on the throne, whom everyone and everything in heaven worships. Do you go to church with your parents? If you do, listen carefully to the singing, and you may hear some of the very words that John heard in heaven. This is because when we are in church, we are worshipping the Lord with the angels.

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### Junior

After your introduction, in connection with which you should use a map, have the class look up the Bible references and compare the various visions, picking out the similarities. Stress the fact that everyone in heaven worships the Lord.

Between the Gospels and the book of Revelation we find in our Bibles twenty-two books. The first—the only one of any length—is called the Acts of the Apostles, and is an account of the first beginnings of the Christian Church and also many things about what the apostles themselves thought. If we read these books attentively, we shall find that the apostles and others who went out to preach the Gospel did not always agree as to just what the

Lord meant people to do. So we cannot take our instruction from them, although they said many fine and helpful things. We must study the Word itself. And after the Acts and the Epistles there comes one more book of the Word, the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation, as we have already noted, is the record of the visions given to the apostle John when he was a very old man. Tradition says that he was the youngest of the apostles and outlived all of them. Judas, we remember, hanged himself before the crucifixion, and again tradition says that all the others except John were martyred sooner or later. This was because the Christian Church grew so fast that the Roman government was afraid of its power and tried to stamp it out.

John was no doubt protected by the Lord so that he might be the instrument through whom the final book of the Word might be given. But he, as we learned from Revelation 1:9, was finally exiled to the island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor. You can find this island on a map of the area, as well as the part of the world covered in the journeys of the apostles and the location of the seven churches in Asia Minor over which John himself had supervision. That these churches were quite different—people are bound to differ in their opinions and likes—we have learned from the messages which the Lord gave John for them (Revelation 2, 3) praising them for their good characteristics but also pointing out certain evils into which they had already fallen, and warning them to correct these evils.

John was first given a wonderful vision of the Lord as He is seen in the heavens, and yet John could recognize Him as the same master he had followed in the world (Revelation 1:13). Then followed the messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor, and then a long and detailed vision of the spiritual course which the Christian Church would take, the war within it between the forces of the Lord and the forces of evil, the judgment which would be executed upon it, and the final coming of a new church. We may think of this amazing vision as a sort of tremendous moving picture acted out before John's spiritual eyes to teach him and us

deep spiritual lessons. John says he was in the spirit (Revelation 1:10, 4:2) when he saw these things. Our chapter for today is the beginning of the picture of the judgment.

What was the first thing John saw after the door was opened in heaven?

Who do you think was the one who sat upon the throne?

What men were around the throne?

How were they dressed?

What other creatures were about the throne?

Do you remember one of our lessons from Ezekiel? Ezekiel, nearly seven hundred years before John, saw a very similar vision. If you have forgotten, read Ezekiel 1:4-18 to see how many things were similar, and then read Ezekiel 10:1 to see what the four living creatures were called. We should know that the Greek word translated “beasts” [KJV] in our chapter for today might better be translated “living creatures” as the Hebrew word is in the first chapter of Ezekiel. In our church service some of us use the words which the living creatures spoke (verse 8), and also we may be familiar with verse 11 because it is sung in some of our responsive services.

We may think of the whole chapter as picturing the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ reigns in heaven and that everyone in heaven worships Him and is governed by Him.

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### Intermediate

Take up the outline of the correspondence, enlarging on it as the young people show interest. Stress the fact that judgment is according to truth, as this will be good preparation for later lessons.

In Mark 16:19 we are told of the Lord’s ascension. This took place forty days after the resurrection and is most fully described in Acts 1:1-12. The book of Acts—the Acts of the Apostles—tells the story of the beginnings of the Christian Church. This book and the twenty-one Epistles—letters written by the apostles and others to the groups of Christians which they organized—do not have an inner sense and so we do not study them in Sunday school, but

they are very valuable historical books and interesting to all Christians. The apostles did go out all over the then-known world and preach the Gospel. Everywhere they went they found some people who were hungry for the good news they had to give of the life of the Lord and the salvation He had made possible. And the Christian Church grew so fast that the Roman government soon began to be suspicious of it and tried to stamp it out. Tradition says that all the apostles except John died martyrs' deaths.

Tradition also says that John was the youngest of the apostles and lived to be about ninety. Near the end of his life he was exiled by the Romans to the little island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor. John had been in charge of seven of the Christian churches which had been organized in Asia Minor. At Patmos he was given the vision which is recorded in the book of Revelation, the last book in our Bible and the final book of the Word. We are told in Revelation 1:19 and in the first verse of our chapter for today that it is a book of prophecy. As we have seen, it begins (chapter 1) with a vision of the Lord—whom John recognized as the same master he had followed in the world—reigning in heaven. Then (chapters 2 and 3) John was given messages to his seven churches in Asia which show us what their inner states were. They were all different; they had good characteristics and bad ones, and they were warned to repent and correct their faults if they wished to remain true representatives of the Lord in the world.

In the Acts and Epistles we learn that very soon after the Lord left them the apostles began to come into differences of opinion as to how His teachings were to be applied to life. They remembered His words but interpreted them differently. We can understand from this why there are so many Christian sects today. The Lord does not force any one of us to think in one way or another, and we are all different; so we draw different ideas from the Lord's teaching. Still we should all be studying the Word and doing our best to understand and obey it. If we are, the Lord can lead us to heaven, even though we may sometimes misunderstand what we read. But if, instead of this, we are forming our opinions according

to our own desires and then trying to find in the Word only what confirms our own chosen opinions, we are not open to the truth in it and the Lord cannot lead us. In the Christian Church—in all Christian churches—there have always been true followers of the Lord and others who only pretended to follow Him. And we know that in each one of us there are tendencies both to good and to evil. The Lord and the angels are working to protect the good and to control the evil both in the individual and in the church. So there is a spiritual war going on all the time, and when we come into the other world there is a time of judgment when the good and the evil are separated. It is this war and the resulting judgment which were shown to John in a series of wonderful living pictures of which the first is our chapter for today.

This vision is very much like one which the prophet Ezekiel had had long before. Read Ezekiel 1:26-28. Read also Exodus 19:16 and 24:10. A trumpet always means the power of the Lord's truth speaking, and a throne is the picture of judgment. It is of course the Lord who sits upon the throne, executing judgment by means of the truth. The precious stones picture the way in which the truth appears to those who love it, showing many different beauties, like the different colors, but always clear and shining, and the sea of glass pictures the clear atmosphere in which even the people of the natural heaven live. The rainbow which Ezekiel saw appeared to John, too. A rainbow is formed by the rays of the sun reflected from raindrops. For us the truths we learn from the Word are spiritual raindrops, and when we realize that the Lord is speaking to us in them, they become shining and beautiful and many-colored.

Now read Ezekiel 1:5-14. The "living creatures" Ezekiel saw are the same "beasts" which John saw. In fact the Greek word translated "beasts" [KJV] would be better translated "living creatures." See if you can remember from our lesson on Ezekiel what the lion, the calf, the man, and the eagle picture. These living creatures are not actual, even in the spiritual world: they are "cherubim," symbolic figures representing the protecting power which divine providence exercises through the letter of the Word. That is why they

are said to be “full of eyes before and behind,” because the Lord sees everything, past, present, and future. Their wings picture the power of the Word to lift out thoughts above the earth.

The twenty-four elders in white garments represent all the good people who have made their thoughts clean by learning the truth, and the crowns of gold show that they have overcome their temptations by means of unselfish love. “Elders” is a name given to people in churches who are looked up to as wiser than others. If we live rightly, we all may grow to be “elders” in this sense, because we become wiser with every year. But if we do not live rightly, we do not become wise with age.

The chapter closes with the worship of the Lord by the creatures and the elders. So John was assured at the beginning of his vision that the Lord rules everything in heaven. He was to see some terrible dangers, and he needed to be sure from the start that the Lord would win the victory. We need to be sure of this, too. The book is written for us.

*Basic Correspondences*

- a trumpet = the power of truth speaking
  - a throne = judgment
    - a lion = power of good or evil
    - a calf = natural affection
    - a man = wisdom
  - an eagle = understanding
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**Senior**

This class will be interested in the fact that differences in belief and practice began early in the Christian Church, and also in the way in which the letter of the Word serves as a guard to the genuine truth within. They should learn that the whole book of Revelation is a prophecy of the end of the first Christian dispensation and the beginning of the New Church era.

The book of Revelation is also called the *Apocalypse*, which is a Greek word meaning “revelation.” The Jews think of the Old Testament as composed of the Law and the Prophets. In the New

Testament the four Gospels may be thought of as the Law and the book of Revelation as the Prophets. For the “new covenant” for the Christian Church is given in the Gospel record of the Lord’s life and teaching, and the book of Revelation is a prophecy of what would happen to the first Christian Church, founded on a literal interpretation of this new law, and a prophecy of the final coming of a new Christian Church when the true spiritual interpretation could be revealed to men.

The beginning of the external history of the first Christian Church is given us in the book of Acts and the twenty-one Epistles which, although they are books which lack the inner sense, are very valuable to all Christians not only as history but because they give us some idea of what the apostles themselves thought about the Lord’s teaching. We do not study them in Sunday school because we should draw our instruction from the Word rather than from the thoughts of men, but you should become familiar with them because they contain many fine statements and much useful information and because they are regarded as authoritative by other Christians who do not have our doctrine of the Word.

John, as we learn from Revelation 1:9, was in exile on the island of Patmos. He was the last of the apostles. The Roman government had tried to suppress the Christian Church from the beginning, and tradition has it that all the apostles except John died a martyr’s death. If this is true, no doubt John was providentially protected so that he might be the instrument through whom the Lord could give this final prophecy.

John’s mind was led step by step into the prophetic details of his vision. First (chapter 1) he was given to see that the master whom he had followed in the world was indeed the almighty God. Then (chapters 2 and 3) by the messages to the seven churches under his care he was shown the inner condition of the groups of Christians which already existed and their relation to the future of the church.

Then, in the first verse of our chapter for today, we read that he saw a door opened in heaven and heard the trumpet-like voice

telling him to come up and see there a vision of things to come. And the first thing he saw was again the Lord, this time seated on His throne, the Lord executing judgment by means of the truth.

Every detail of the vision has to do with the beauty and power of truth: the throne itself, which represents judgment; the precious stones, which represent truths made clear and brilliant by love of them; the rainbow, truth as it is reflected in the knowledges of the letter of the Word which we receive in our minds; the white raiment of the elders, truth expressed in life, “the righteousness of saints” (Revelation 19:8); the sea of glass, the clear atmosphere of the ultimates of heaven; and the four “beasts” or cherubim, which picture the Lord’s protection of inner truth by means of the letter of the Word.

The chapter should be compared with Ezekiel’s vision (Ezekiel 1 and 10), Isaiah’s (Isaiah 6:1-3), Daniel’s (Daniel 7:9-10); and with the vision granted to Moses and the elders of Israel at Sinai (Exodus 24:10).

John needed this vision of the glory and power of the truth he was to proclaim. He was to see terrible things portrayed, but he knew from the beginning that the armies of evil would inevitably fail.

We need this reassurance also. Our world today is shaken by fear of the future. Evil forces seem to be abroad, and the voices which speak for love and peace seem weak. But the Lord is with those who proclaim His truth. They may have great tribulation, but they will conquer in the end. “For there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few.” (I Samuel 14:6) Each of us can do a great deal of good in our world today by speaking and living without fear, believing in the Lord’s Word with its laws and its promises, and putting our whole trust in Him. We can worship every Sunday with the very words of this vision: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.” So we help to establish the Lord’s kingdom on earth. We cannot establish it by looking to men for wisdom.

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### Adult

The relation of the Acts and Epistles to the Word is important for all adults because we hear so much emphasis placed on the Epistles by non-New Church people. Many interesting points are suggested in the sections from the *Apocalypse Revealed*, which may be read and discussed one by one.

In our study of the Gospel we saw how little the apostles, devoted though they were, understood the Lord's teaching, and how prone they were to forget things that He told them, and also at the end how weak was the flesh, however willing the spirit may have been. Only their contact with Him after the resurrection and their witness of His ascension (Mark 16:19) could have inspired in them the courage and perseverance with which they afterward accomplished their assigned task of preaching the Gospel to all the world (Mark 16:15). The record of their accomplishment is preserved for us in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, which is the basis of our knowledge of the beginnings of the Christian Church. Although the book of Acts—written by Luke—does not have an inner sense, and for this reason we do not study it in Sunday school, it gives us a certain background for our approach to the book of Revelation. It shows the bitterness of the opposition to the early Christians both by the Jews and by the Romans, and it also shows that the apostles did not always agree as to just what the teachings of the Lord were and how they should be applied in the daily life. The Epistles are further evidence of this, and while they contain many fine and helpful statements and much valuable information, we must still for our doctrine go to the Word itself.\*

Tradition says that all of the eleven apostles except John were martyred. John, the youngest of them, was the only one who lived to very old age. No doubt he was providentially protected that he might be the instrument through whom the great prophetic vision might be recorded which concludes our Word. This vision is thought to have been given him in the year A.D. 95, when he was about ninety years of age. Although he was living in exile on the island

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\*But several New Church doctrines are succinctly *stated* in the Epistles. —Ed.

of Patmos, he was still looked to as the head of seven churches in Asia Minor. From the messages given him for these churches (chapters 2 and 3) we learn that even at that early date the different groups of Christians had developed different characteristics and ideas. Although we recognize these messages as applying in their inner meaning to the different types of Christian discipleship in all times, still they should show us how foolish it is for anyone to imagine that unanimity of belief and practice is possible today. One of the lessons of our chapter for today is that the Lord provides in the letter of the Word a guard over its inner truths for the very purpose of permitting differences of interpretation. In AR 239 Swedenborg says: "The sense of the letter of the Word serves as a guard for the genuine truths which lie within; and the guard consists in this, that the literal sense can be turned hither and thither, that is, can be explained according to everyone's understanding, without its internal being hurt or violated; for no harm ensues from the literal sense being understood differently by different people; but it does harm when the Divine truths which are within are perverted, for it is by this that the Word suffers violence. To prevent this, the literal sense guards, and it guards with those who are in falsities from religion, but yet do not confirm them, for from these the Word suffers no violence. This guard is signified by 'cherubim,' and is also described by them in the Word."

The whole vision is a vision of judgment, a picture of how divine providence by means of the truths of the Word protects the good and separates them from the evil. This judgment goes on in each individual, but we know that the book of Revelation particularly describes the judgment which was to take place at the end of the first Christian dispensation, and the beginning of a new dispensation through the opening of the Word. Chapter 4, Swedenborg says, "treats of the arrangement and preparation of all things in heaven for the judgment, to be executed from the Word, and according to it; likewise concerning the acknowledgment that the Lord is the only judge" (AR introduction to chapter 4).

In studying this chapter we should begin by comparing it with

earlier visions of very similar nature: Exodus 19:16, 24:9-10; Ezekiel 1 and 10; Isaiah 6:1-3; and Daniel 7:9-10. If we wish to study it in greater detail we should go to the *Apocalypse Explained*, but we shall find a condensed explanation, including a very brief summary interpretation, in the *Apocalypse Revealed*. Here we shall note that the voice of the trumpet always pictures the power of truth speaking, the throne judgment, and the four “beasts” or cherubim the guard the Lord provides against profanation.

In AR 233 we read: “He who does not know the spiritual sense of the Word, and at the same time the genuine truths of the church, may believe, that when the Last Judgment shall come, the Lord will sit upon a throne, and that there will be other judges also upon thrones around Him. But he who knows the spiritual sense of the Word, and at the same time the genuine truths of the church, knows that the Lord will not then sit upon a throne, and that neither will there be other judges about Him; and further, that neither will the Lord judge anyone to hell, but that the Word will judge every one, the Lord moderating that all things may be done according to justice . . . ‘Twelve’ signifies all, and is predicated of the truths and goods of heaven and the church (n. 348); the same is signified by ‘twenty-four’; therefore ‘the twelve apostles’ and the ‘twenty-four elders’ signify all things of the church; and ‘twelve,’ as also ‘twenty-four thrones,’ signify the all of judgment.”

We are told in AR 237 that by the seven lamps are signified “the New Church in heaven and on earth from the Lord through the Divine truth proceeding from Him,” just as by the seven stars and the seven lampstands in Revelation 1:20, and in AR 238 that “*Before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal*, signifies the New Heaven from Christians who are in general truths from the literal sense of the Word.” The New Heaven referred to in the last quotation is the heaven which was formed at the time of the Second Coming from all the good souls of the first Christian Church who are described in Revelation 6:9-11.

We recognize in verse 8 one of the familiar responses which is sung in some of our churches, and another in verse 11 which appears

in some of our responsive services. When we sing these, it will be helpful to remember that they are sung in heaven also and especially that if we sing them with sincere hearts, the Lord can make them a bulwark for us against many temptations.

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### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*Apocalypse Revealed*, n. 231: “‘A stone,’ in the Word, signifies truth in ultimates, and ‘a precious stone,’ truth transparent from good (n. 915). There are two colors fundamental of the rest in the spiritual world, the color white and the color red. The color white derives its origin from the light of the sun in heaven, thus from spiritual light, which is shining white; and the color red derives its origin from the fire of the sun there, thus from celestial light, which is flamy . . . This is the reason why precious stones, in the Word, signify such things as are of the truth of wisdom, or of the good of love, and that ‘the jasper,’ because it is shining white, signifies the things which are of the truth of wisdom; and ‘the sardius,’ because it is red, the things which are of the good of love.”

*Apocalypse Revealed*, n. 232: “In the spiritual world there appear rainbows of many kinds, they appear of various colors as upon the earth, and they appear of one color; here of one color, because it is said ‘like unto an emerald.’ . . . The Divine sphere which surrounds the Lord is from His Divine love, and at the same time from His Divine wisdom, which, when it is represented in the heavens, appears in the celestial kingdom red like a ruby, in the spiritual kingdom blue like the lapis lazuli, in the natural kingdom green like the emerald; everywhere with ineffable splendor and radiance.”

*Apocalypse Revealed*, n. 238: “*And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal*, signifies the New Heaven from Christians who are in general truths from the literal sense of the Word. In the spiritual world there appear atmosphere, and also waters, like as in our world; the atmospheres, in which the angels of the highest heaven dwell, are as it were ethereal; the atmospheres, in which the angels of the middle heaven dwell, are as it were aerial; and the atmospheres, in which the angels of the lowest heaven dwell, are as it were aqueous; and these last appear as seas at the boundaries of heaven, where they dwell who are in general truths from the literal sense of the Word. . . . by ‘the sea of glass’ which was before the throne, is meant the church among those who are at the boundaries . . . It is called ‘a sea of glass like unto crystal,’ from the pellucidity of the Divine truth proceeding from the Lord.”

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### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What books in the Bible tell about the beginnings of the Christian Church?  
*Acts, Epistles*
- J. Why do we not study these books in Sunday school? *they do not have an inner sense*
- P. What book are we now studying? *Revelation*
- J. By what other name is this book called? *Apocalypse*
- J. What is it about? *visions*
- P. To whom were these visions given? *the apostle John*
- J. Where was John and why? *Patmos, exiled*
- P. What did John see first? *the risen Lord*
- J. What messages were given him? *letters to seven churches*
- P. In our chapter for today what did he see? *a throne*
- J. Can you describe the throne? *[see verses 2-5]*
- J. How many elders were there? *twenty-four*
- P. How many creatures were there? *four*
- P. What faces did they have? *lion, calf, man, eagle*
- J. Where have we learned of beasts like these before? *Ezekiel 1*
- J. By what other name do we know them? *cherubim*
- J. What did they cry before the Lord? *Holy, holy, holy*
- J. Where have we heard these words before? *a familiar hymn, the Sanctus, the Trisagion*
- I. What does a throne represent? *judgment*
- S. What do the four beasts represent? *protecting power of divine providence:*  
*lion = power for good*  
*calf = natural affections*  
*man = wisdom*  
*eagle = understanding*