Group Discussion Questions for 3/13
Revelation 4

Read chapter 4 of Revelation at least twice, without looking at notes or commentaries. Also remind yourself of what happened immediately prior to the dictation of the seven letters to the churches by re-reading chapter 1 verses 10 to 20. Also read the visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah: Ezekiel 1, Isaiah 6. Then answer the following questions.


2. Who is sitting on the throne? How do you know?

3. Why are there 24 elders? Who do they represent? What occurrences of the number 12 can you remember from other parts of Scripture? What is the meaning behind their white garments and golden crowns?

4. In verse 5, what is meaning of the phrase "the seven spirits of God"? Look at chapter 1 verse 4, and recall our discussion there. Look also at 2 Chronicles 4:19-20 and Zechariah 4:1-6.

5. Try to picture in your head the four living creatures, as described here. How successful are you in doing so? Consider the visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah. How similar are these creatures to those seen by the Old Testament prophets? How are they different?

6. Looking only at chapter 4, what purpose do the living creatures serve? How often do they say, 'Holy, holy, holy'?

7. The 24 elders "cast their crowns before the throne" (see verse 6 for a description of what is before the throne). What is the purpose of a crown (see 2 Tim 4:8)? What does the action of casting their crowns before the throne symbolize?

8. Compare verse 11 to verse 8. How are the statements of the creatures and the elders similar? How are they different?

9. Read the words of "Holy, Holy, Holy." Compare to this chapter.

10. Does Jesus appear in this chapter?

11. Consider the impression left by this chapter, in the context of the seven letters to the churches which we have just read. What is your response to John's description of what he sees here? What purpose does this chapter serve?
Commentary: God and His Angelic Court, 4:1-11

A door stands open in heaven to give John access to heaven and to the vision that he will see. A voice invites him up, the same voice as in 1:10, the voice of Christ. It is always through Christ alone that we have access to God, and the same is true of John. **Come up here** indicates that John ascends into heaven, whether in the body or out of it (2 Cor. 12:2-3). Moses went up to Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:3, 20), and Paul was caught up to heaven (2 Cor. 12:2) to receive special revelations. Ezekiel saw heaven opened (Ezek. 1:1). Likewise with John. Though the experience of John in unique, God gives the description of this vision to us as well. He thus enables the whole church of God to have access to the heavenly sphere. In this sense, then, we can through appropriating the vision share in the benefits of John's experience.

The content of John's vision is **what must take place after this**. The language is similar to 1:19 and refers to the whole of 4:1-22:5. Because God is in control and has foreordained the entire course of history (Eph. 1:11; Isa. 46:10), he can tell beforehand the character of the entire age leading up to the Second Coming. The guarantee from God is reassuring for believers who must face hardship, persecution, or even death.

John is **in the Spirit** (v. 2). As in 1:10, 17:3, and 21:10, the Spirit brings him to the location from which he will see the vision. And more broadly, the Spirit supervises and controls the entire visionary process, as in Ezekiel 2:2; etc. The Spirit is the mediator of all prophetic revelations, and the mediator of our understanding of spiritual things as well (1 Cor. 2:9-16).

At the center of the vision is God's throne in heaven, representing his kingly rule. God's sovereignty is a fundamental theme throughout Revelation. As the vision unfolds, we find that God is surrounded by successive circles of servants: four living creatures, 24 elders, and myriads of angels (5:11). God is at the central location, a fitting representation of the fact that he is the all-important, all-determining spiritual center and power center for the universe.

**Someone** sits on the throne. But the details of God's appearance are not described, reminding us that his greatness always exceeds our grasp. (See 1:12-20.)

What is the meaning of the jasper, carnelian, and the rainbow like an emerald? It is important to keep in mind the big picture. God's appearance far surpasses the splendor of the court of any earthly king. The precious stones display his wealth, his beauty, and his glory. "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Fittingly, his throne displays beautiful, multicolored light. The jasper is white or translucent (21:11). Carnelian is red, and emerald is green. One is reminded of the jewel-like splendor of the new Jerusalem (21:11; 21:19-20), the high priest's breastpiece (Exod. 28:17-20), and some Old Testament theophanies (Exod. 24:10; Ezek. 1:16, 22, 26, 28). In ancient times it was not easy for an earthly king to obtain precious stones except through international trade (cf. Ezek. 28:13, concerning the international trading city, Tyre).
Hence, indirectly the presence of these precious stones underlines the international reach of God’s kingship.

God is himself the ultimate source and supply of splendor and beauty. His splendor is partly reflected in the things that he has made: the brightness and colors of sun, of heavenly bodies, of rainbow, of precious jewels (cf. Isa. 6:3). The church and its members are in turn to reflect his splendor through the holiness of their lives (Rev. 21:19-20; 19:8; 22:11; Matt. 5:14-16; 1 Pet. 3:3-5).

We may discern a general pattern in the way that God’s glory is reflected and displayed. We may start with the core idea of God’s kingship, represented by his throne. God as the great King rules over the whole universe, assisted by a surrounding court of heavenly beings (angels). Man is made in the image of God. Adam as a subordinate king, under God, rules over the earth, assisted by his fellow human beings. In all these areas the rule of God is reflected. Now we may transfer these ideas into the analogous area of God’s presence, his dwelling place, and his appearance. We may start with the heavenly sphere, where God rules, assisted by angelic beings. First, God dwells eternally in himself, through the mystery of the indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity (John 14:11). Revelation does not use explicitly the language of indwelling, but presupposes the reality of the Trinity through the fact that God and the Lamb share their one throne (22:1) and their name (22:13; 1:8). Second, God dwells in the midst of his heavenly courtiers, surrounded by angels (1 Kings 22:19; Dan. 7:10; Ps. 89:6-7; Rev. 4:4-11; 5:11). Third, God dwells in heaven as his particular abode, but so that he fills all things (1 Kings 8:27, 30; Jer. 23:24). In all these spheres God displays his glory. The jewel-like splendor of his magnificence appears in the immediate vicinity of the throne (Rev. 4:3), among the angelic beings (Ezek. 1:16, 22), and in the lights of heaven (Rev. 21:23).

Next, consider the earthly sphere, where man rules over the earth. The high priest as a model of holiness displays what is to be reflected in each human being (Exod. 28:17-20). The jewels of the new Jerusalem show what the church as a corporate body is to reflect (Rev. 21:19-20). And the tabernacle and the temple, as special dwelling places of God on earth, display his glory through their beautiful colors and adornments.

We have traced the idea of jewel-like splendor and beauty through its various reflections in the various spheres. The same could be done with almost any of the aspects of God’s appearing. For instance, take the throne in verse 2, symbolizing God’s authority and power to rule. The angelic beings around God’s throne also sit on thrones (v. 4). They have power to rule that is derivative from and reflecting of God’s power. In the universe as a whole, the heavenly lights rule over the day and the night (Gen. 1:16). On earth, earthly kings have thrones; they have genuine authority deriving from God (Rom. 13:1-5). All believers have the privilege of rule, not only as sons of Adam (Gen. 1:28), but preeminently as sons of God in Christ, who have been given to sit with him (Eph. 2:6; Rev. 3:21). Finally, in the earthly tabernacle and temple, the ark of the covenant represents the place from which God rules (Exod. 25:22). The ten commandments
The lampstands in the tabernacle and the temple (1:12, 20; 11:4). The heavenly lights reflect God’s glory (Rev. 21:23). Human beings rewarded for righteousness wear white robes, individually (Rev. 3:4) and corporately (Rev. 19:8). They are light-bearers, like the lampstands in the tabernacle and the temple (1:12, 20; 11:4).

The term “elders” has suggested to some people that we have here the elders of the church, representing the church in heaven. But in 5:10 the elders speak of the church in the third person, “them,” indicating that they are distinct from the church. And in 7:13-14 one of the elders performs an explanatory function, such as is typical of angelic beings in this kind of literature (see Introduction: Apocalyptic). They are here called “elders” because age goes with wisdom (cf. Dan. 7:9). Just as an earthly king has wise men to counsel him on important state decisions, so God has superbly wise counselors as his court attendants.

The number 24 is difficult. In 1 Chronicles 24 David organizes the Aaronic priests into 24 divisions. Priests are dedicated servants of God’s temple on earth. Likewise, God’s dwelling in heaven has its dedicated servants, who must have holiness and consecration to qualify them for service. Thus, the 24 elders as heavenly, angelic beings, correspond to 24 priestly orders of the earthly Aaronic priesthood.

But there is something more to be said. As we have observed, heavenly reality is reflected on earth. Are there then priests now living on earth, who may mirror the action of this angelic order of priests? The church on earth is to praise and serve God with the same purity and devotion as this angelic order displays. The church is founded on the 12 apostles (21:14), who correspond to the 12 tribes of Israel (21:12). Hence, with some justification, people have suggested that 24 represents the people of God of both the Old and New Testament, 12 tribes of Israel from the Old and 12 apostles from the New.
The elders are angelic beings, and hence not identical with the church. But they and the church are still images of one another.

The elders have thrones, white robes, and crowns of gold, all of which reflect aspects of God on his throne.

The lightning and thunder (v 5) exhibit God’s power in a manner analogous to Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:16-19) and other divine appearances (8:5; 11:19; 16:18; Ps. 18:11-15; Ezek. 1:4). He thus reminds us of the power of his voice (1:15; see on 1:10) and the final shaking of creation still to come (11:19; 21:1; Heb. 12:25-27). Lightning and loud noise accompany God’s appearing in judgment in 8:5; 11:19; 16:18. Note the loud noise or voice in 1:10, 15; 5:2, 11-12; 6:1, 10; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 10:3; 11:12, 15; 12:10; 14:2, 7, 9, 15, 18; 16:1, 17; 18:2; 19:1, 6, 17; 21:3.

The seven lamps allude to Zech. 4:2, 6, and Rev. 1:12. Seven spirits refer to the sevenfold fullness of the Holy Spirit, as in 1:12. The light of the Holy Spirit is the original light of which the seven-branched lampstand of Exodus 25:31-40 was a copy. The similarities with 1:12 suggest that the seven churches, as a true temple of God, are to give out light reflecting the very presence of God through his Spirit.

What is the sea of glass (v. 6)? See 15:2; Exod. 24:10. This imagery might suggest a number of associations. The parallel verse in 15:2 calls to mind the waters of the Red Sea. The defeat of Pharaoh and the pushing back of the waters foreshadowed God’s final victory over evil (Isa. 51:9-11). If so, the sea of glass pictures waters utterly subdued under God’s power. Moreover, the extent and beauty of the crystal-like sea, when taken together with the precious stones in 4:3 and 21:18-21, suggest the magnificence and preciousness of God’s throne. The numerous parallels elsewhere with the temple might suggest that this sea is the heavenly counterpart of the sea in Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 7:23-25). Finally, the picture of heavenly water might simply suggest the fact that God faithfully supplies water from heaven (Deut. 11:11). Which of these various allusions shall we choose? Perhaps all or nearly all should be absorbed together. It is consistent with the style of Revelation to weave together a multitude of Old Testament images.

The four living creatures, like the 24 elders, form a circle of angelic beings serving in God’s throne room. In the Ancient Near East kings’ thrones or palaces often had statues of winged lions or winged bulls that stood as guardians of the king’s presence. In the Bible cherubim function as both guardians of God’s holiness (Gen. 3:24; Exod. 25:117-22; 26:31) and chariot-bearers of his throne (1 Chron. 28:18; Ps. 18:10). The four living creatures in Revelation are reminiscent of the living creatures or cherubim in Ezekiel 1 and 10 and the seraphim in Isaiah 6. The cherubim in the Old Testament are closely associated with God’s chariot, going with the swiftness of the wind (Ps. 18:10). They are, as it were, the heavenly original of which earthly winds are an image. They are four in number, corresponding to the four winds of heaven in the four directions of the compass (Zech. 6:5; Rev. 7:1). Their eyes, seeing in every direction (v. 6), mirror the all-seeing eyes of God (1:14; Prov. 15:3; 2 Chron. 16:9).
The living creatures are respectively like a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. The living creatures in Ezekiel 1 each have four faces, of a lion, an ox, a man, an eagle. The list is the same, but the creatures in Ezekiel are all identical, with four faces each, whereas the ones in Revelation are different, each with only one face. So are these creatures in Revelation distinct from or substantially identical with the ones in Ezekiel? Revelation constantly utilizes earlier Scripture, but uses it creatively, in new configurations. Any vision of God and his throne room is less like a photograph than an artistic impression. It is a vision, which symbolizes rather than photographs the realities that it presents (cf. Num. 12:6-8). Symbolization shows us the meaning, rather than merely the physical appearance. But symbolization also warns us that we never fathom to the bottom who God is. Yes, these are the heavenly beings of Ezekiel 1; but in a new configuration, so that we do not exhaustive understand.

Why the four faces, lion, ox, man, and eagle? It is impossible to say for certain. But most likely they continue the theme of imaging: created things display something of the glory of God. Among earthly creatures, the lion is the greatest and fiercest of the wild animals, the ox the strongest of the domestic animals, the eagle the most majestic of birds, and man the ruler over all animals. God is the Original, the great and strong and majestic ruler over all. His heavenly assistants reflect his attributes. And these heavenly models in turn are reflected in what God has created on earth, not only in the creation of human beings but of animals as well. We may often admire and be fascinated by the capacities and skills and strengths that God has given to earthly animals. How much more it is so with respect to awesome heavenly beings, and how much more of God himself! The heavenly beings even now praise God with reverence and eloquence (4:8). Likewise, the destiny of earthly beings, both man and beast, is to join in praise (5:13-14).

The four living creatures have six wings, like the seraphim of Isaiah 6:2, whereas Ezekiel's living creatures have four wings apiece (Ezek. 1:6). The variation again shows the creativity and flexibility in this new vision.

The four living creatures utter a paean of praise for God's holiness (v. 9), like the “Holy, holy, holy” of the seraphim in Isaiah 6:3. Here we are at the heart of God's presence. The Israelite earthly tabernacle and temple had an outer court, a holy place, and a most holy place (literally, holy of holies; Exod. 26:34). These represented different degrees of holiness in the approach to God. Only ceremonially clean Israelites were to enter the outer court. Only priests could enter the holy place. Only the high priest could enter the most holy place, only once a year, with special provisions for cleansing (Lev. 16; Heb. 9:7). But all this arrangement, impressive as it was, was only a shadow of God's heavenly presence (Heb. 9:11-12, 23-28). Now we see the real thing, the heavenly Original of the tabernacle. Fittingly, real cherubim, not merely carved imitations, utter the praise. They celebrate the supreme, unimaginable holiness of God at the center. He is the Almighty, the sovereign ruler. The cherubim creatively build on the seraphic song of Isa. 6:3 by describing God Lordship over past, present, and future, who was, and is, and is to come, as in 1:4. The revelation of God now, in this vision, prepares us for that further coming when he will be manifested in consummation (22:1-5).
The living creatures are answered by the 24 elders, as by a kind of antiphonal choir (vv. 10-11). The elders bow down, acknowledging the majesty and authority of God, then pledging their submission, obedience, and reverence. Their crowns, victory wreaths of honor, have meaning only as they are seen as derivative from the One deserving all honor. “Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory” (Ps. 115:1; cf. 1 Cor. 4:7). Would that not only all our theology but all our motives and conduct were thoroughly animated by this impulse of worship!

As evidence of the supreme worthiness of God, the elders single out his action of creation (v. 11). As Creator, God has absolute mastery, ownership, and control over what he has created. In creation, every speck, every atom, every detail of pattern, the very being of everything, derived from the hand of God. His triumph was absolute, his power and wisdom unfathomable, his glory superb. Such, then, are so many displays of God’s character in creation. They form a wonderful guarantee that he will continue to be Master, up until the full achievement of his purposes in the consummation (21:5-6; see 1:8). God himself is the ultimate guarantee and refuge for saints in distress or discouragement (Heb. 6:13).

Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty

1. Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
   Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.
   Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty,
   God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

2. Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
   casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
   cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,
   which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

3. Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee,
   though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see,
   only thou art holy; there is none beside thee,
   perfect in power, in love and purity.

4. Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
   All thy works shall praise thy name, in earth and sky and sea.
   Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty,
   God in three persons, blessed Trinity.