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What in Heaven Is Going On?

Insights from the Book of Revelation

Charles A. Gieschen

Why are we given these amazing glimpses into the reality of heaven, of what it is like now (Rev. 4:1-5:14) and what it will be like after Christ's glorious return (Rev. 7:9-17 and 21:1-22:5)? Because sin and death cause much pain and many tears. The depiction in Revelation 4-5 reminds us that we already now share in this heavenly reality. We worship the Lamb with angels and archangels as we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy," and receive His true body and blood in the Lord's Supper.

We can see, feel, smell, touch, and taste what is going on here on earth, but how do Christians know what is going on in heaven? Twenty-twenty vision and sensitive hearing do not help us at all to see and hear the mysteries of heaven. As in most spiritual matters, we are completely dependent on God revealing the mysteries of heaven to us through those who wrote the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And when it comes to heaven, one of the most significant writings that reveals the mysteries of heaven is the Book of Revelation. As with a few of the Old Testament prophets (i.e., Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah), God gave John *visionary* prophecy so that he could see and hear a part of reality that is usually never seen or heard prior to our physical death and eventual resurrection; namely, what we typically call "heaven." The accessibility of heaven to John and us is wonderfully depicted in Revelation as "a door standing open in heaven!" (Rev. 4:1).

So what in heaven is going on with all the angels, saints, and God Himself? The book of Revelation offers three very significant glimpses into heaven. The first and most important is found in chapters 4-5, which is a vision of the ultimate mystery: the presence of God on the divine throne in heaven. Unlike

the challenges among the seven churches *on earth* detailed in Revelation 2-3 or the devastation *on earth* depicted in the three cycles of seven that follow in chapters 6-16, John sees a perfectly ordered and triumphal reality *in heaven*. He sees the unique throne of God with the Father present on the throne, even



THE ADORATION OF THE LAMB, FROM THE APOCALYPSE SERIES. ARTIST: ALBRECHT DÜRER (GERMAN, NUREMBERG 1471-1528 NUREMBERG). DATE: N.D.. MUSEUM: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, USA

though no physical form of the Father is seen. He is said to have “the appearance of jasper and carnelian” (Rev. 4:3). This fits with what Jesus taught in John 6:46, that no one has seen the Father except the Son. John also sees 24 elders around the throne, who function as both priests and kings who serve God and reign with Him. He also sees and hears the four living creatures who never cease to sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” to God as they mark out the perimeter of the divine throne.

The most important part of this scene, however, is the Lamb in the midst of the throne (5:6-12). Here we actually see the mystery of the one God: Jesus in the physical form of a slaughtered lamb, standing with seven horns and seven eyes. Why such a depiction of Jesus? Each one of these details communicates a profound and powerful portrait about who Jesus is and what He has done. The slaughtered lamb emphasizes His true humanity and death for sin on Passover. His standing communicates His resurrection victory. One horn is a symbol of power, so His seven horns depict His omnipotence as true God. His seven eyes tell of His union with the Holy Spirit and His divine omniscience. The same type of worship given to the Father by the 24 elders and four living creatures is now given to the Son who is the Lamb, showing their oneness as the God of Israel. Although the earlier praise given to the Father is based upon His work of creation (Rev. 4:11), the praise given to the Lamb is due to His work of redemption: “You were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). The overwhelming focus of this vision of heaven is that Christ’s victory and reign are a present and ongoing reality until His return in glory.

The second significant glimpse into heaven comes in Revelation 7:9-17. Those hearing or reading this book have just witnessed the opening of six of the seven seals with rather frightful results on earth (Rev. 6:1-7) and then are given a comforting preview of their future as the Church triumphant in resurrected glory. Through John’s record, we see “a great multitude that no one could number,” who have bodies clothed in white robes, hands that hold palm branches, and voices that sing out loudly in praise to God (Rev. 7:9-10). Why are they resurrected and living to all eternity? Because of the slaughtered and standing Lamb: “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”

(Rev. 7:14). The devastating effects of the fall have been undone in this scene: there will be no more hunger, thirst, sunburn, or tears! The irony is that the *Lamb* will also be our *shepherd* for eternity (Rev. 7:17).

The third significant glimpse into heaven comes in Revelation 21-22, at the conclusion of the visionary prophecy that John was given. This scene depicts the result of Christ’s return on the last day for all those who are in Christ: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4). Then there is an elaborate depiction of the New Jerusalem as a city with 12 gates (representing the 12 tribes of Israel), 12 foundations (representing the 12 apostles), and adorned with various precious jewels and gold to show its priceless worth (Rev. 21:9-27). The Lord God and the Lamb will be present in this city and we will see His face; there is no need for a temple. It will be a restored Eden with a river of the water of life flowing and the tree of life providing different fruit for every month (Rev. 22:1-4).

Why are we given these amazing glimpses into the reality of heaven, of what it is like now (Rev. 4:1-5:14) and what it will be like after Christ’s glorious return (Rev. 7:9-17 and 21:1-22:5)? Because sin and death cause much pain and many tears. The depiction in Revelation 4-5 reminds us that we already now share in this heavenly reality. We worship the Lamb with angels and archangels as we sing “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and receive His true body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. Heaven is not an up there and future reality, it is a present and accessible reality that we participate in through worship. Revelation 7 and 21-22 remind us of our glorious resurrected future without any more tears because the Lamb was slaughtered for our sin, has been raised, and is victorious. This sure and certain future of resurrected bodies and restored creation is a source of comfort and hope during our earthly journey. Knowing what the future holds, we confidently pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20). 🏔️

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