

Revelation 4–5

The Elders in Heaven

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The Churches Pass from View

There is a plain and simple fact which ought to strike any attentive reader of the Revelation: the churches are no longer in view after ch. 3 as subsisting and the province of the dealings of the Lord here below. I do not say that they have ceased absolutely to exist; but they are not before the Lord as the objects of His care or even chastening. They are nowhere taken account of after the seer's prophetic visions begin. They are alluded to in the concluding observations of the book, ch. 22, when the whole course of the prophecy is closed, and the Spirit of God is merely giving, as a final exhortation, the use to be made of the book. But the fact that claims our attention is, that it is here that the curtain drops upon the churches here below. We hear no more about them, save only that in the conclusion, as already said, there is a call to hear the book in general.

The scene therein is changed. A door is seen by the prophet opened in heaven, not yet for the Lord Jesus, followed by His saintly hosts, to come out of heaven (which remains for a later date), but for John to go up and see in the Spirit. "After this I looked, and, behold, a door opened in heaven." It is not for drawing near into the holiest by faith: the Spirit of God never calls this the opening of a door. In Heb. 10 the veil is shown to be rent, and the believer even now by faith draws near through the value of the blood of Christ. But here we have the ordinary figure of that by which one enters in; and accordingly, lest there should be any doubt about the meaning, the first voice which the prophet heard was, as it were, of a trumpet talking with him, and saying, "Come up hither, and I will show thee the things which must be after these" {Rev. 4:1}. Simple as the change just suggested is, the importance of it is this, that it binds what is to follow in the book with the termination of the history of the seven churches. There is a close link formed between the end of the church's state and the prophetic visions following as immediately consequent.

The Throne in Heaven: God's Government in View

What he sees there first of all was a throne set, and One sitting on the throne. It was the throne of God on high. It is not said to be a golden throne, as in the most holy place, whether of the tabernacle or of the temple. Such was the propitiatory seat of gold where blood was sprinkled as a means for men to draw near through sacrifice, priesthood maintaining consistency with it spite of failure. But this is in no way the object of the throne in Rev. 4. The golden throne, with atoning blood upon and before it, is one of grace; it is the expression of what God can be and is to man, where grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord. The throne that was now seen set in heaven was judicial, not the witness of divine grace, though it be always, no doubt, the throne of divine majesty.

"He that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone." The jasper, as we know, is used as symbolic of the glory of God in connection with the heavenly state. Round about the throne was seen a rainbow, the sign of God's beneficence to the earth, and at the same time the pledge of a limit put to judgment; but it is not as ordinarily seen among men (Gen. 9). It recalled that covenant with the earth; but there is no question of rain here, as even in Ezek. 1:28. It is simply the divine idea. It is not the circumstances of its use or application, but the grand truth that was represented there -- the faithful sign of God's covenant with the creature. Hence it was shown in a form which was particularly refreshing to the eye; it was "in sight like unto an emerald."

The Twenty-Four Elders: Who Are They?

"And round about the throne were four and twenty -- not merely seats, but -- thrones" {Rev. 4:4}. Every throne is a seat, but every seat is not a throne. These were not bare seats, but thrones for those on whom royalty was conferred. It was,

no doubt, a heavenly kind of royalty; but still the thrones were for certain ones to fill.

This is a remarkable feature. We never hear of angels seated on thrones. Angels never govern; they were made not to reign but to be servants. They never rise above the character of service. Man was made to rule, though, of course, in subjection to God. Even the first man was made to govern. When God made him He said, "Let them have dominion." It was not merely to do His will. As servants, all are necessarily bound to do the will of God; and all the blessedness of dominion, as of everything else also, depends on its being the will of God. But when God made the first man, He was not looking merely at Adam, or the race: the Second Man, the last Adam, was before His mind.

Now on these thrones are seen twenty-four elders, clothed in white raiment, with crowns of gold on their heads. White raiment is the clothing of righteousness -- not of imputed righteousness, for that is perfectly universal among all God's people, but of practical righteousness, the righteousness of the saints, as we see in Rev. 19, where the white linen is explained to be the righteousnesses of saints. That is, each has a righteousness which divine grace has produced in them and by them, and this is recognised above.

The twenty-four elders represent redeemed and glorified men in heaven, in a singular and conspicuous place of blessedness -- saints glorified in the presence of God. This trust I strongly suspect to be composed of the risen saints of the Old and New Testament together, the whole church and people of God, seen in heaven before the prophetic visions that follow begin. They were not angels but men -- men no longer on earth, but in heaven; they constitute a new class seen for the first time above.

The Sealed Book and the Worthy Lamb

In chapter 5 we have the sealed book -- sealed with seven seals -- in the right hand of Him Who sat on the throne. And John wept much, because no man was found worthy to open the book, or to look thereon. But one of the elders said, "Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof."

And then John sees, in the midst of the throne, a Lamb as it had been slain. It is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, presented in His character as the One Who has redeemed by His blood. He takes the book out of the right hand of Him that sat upon the throne; and when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, every one of them having harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying:

Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign over the earth {Rev. 5:9, 10}.

The importance of the true text of verse 10 is very great, because it shows that besides the twenty-four elders who have this glorious and heavenly place as chiefs of heavenly priesthood, there are others bought by His blood who, although not in the place of such exalted dignity, are celebrated as made kings and priests, and shall reign over the earth. Thus they are not only to be spared during the tribulation that is coming on the world, but to reign with Christ on the earth when He appears in glory.

If He took that book, it was not merely to read it Himself; it was in love to make all plain for us. What could make it plainer to Him? He opens the seals, and tells us the contents. He unfolds the mind of God. Oh, may we heed it!

This sketch necessarily could not be very complete; but in it I have designedly passed over nothing of importance, as it has occurred to me in glancing over the portion of the word of God before us. I trust it is at least clear to those who have given me their hearing, that the elders were beyond doubt men; that they were men no longer on earth, but in heaven; that they constitute a new class seen for the first time above.

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