

The Grace of Wrath

Studies in the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Text

Chapter 4:1-11

Topic

The twenty-four elders around the throne of God
worship Him and toss their crowns at His feet

Title

"The Tossing Crowns Affair"

Introduction

The Dresch family had a bad experience after Hurricane Irene.

They obeyed orders to evacuate their Staten Island home as the storm approached, only to return and discover they had been robbed.

So when city officials sent out warnings one year later of Hurricane Sandy heading their way, they made the decision to stay put and ride out the storm.

Bad decision. It cost George Dresch and his 13-year-old daughter their lives. It left Patricia Dresch critically injured in a hospital bed struggling to comprehend life without her husband and daughter.

There is a severe storm-warning in Revelation chapter four.

"Lightnings, thunderings, and voices" (v5) will proceed from Heaven, striking the earth.

The future storm has a name; in fact, it's so severe that it has more than one name. It's called the Day of the Lord, and the Time of Jacob's Trouble.

We know it best as the Tribulation, or as the Great Tribulation.

It will be described in chapters six through eighteen of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. It will last a full seven years and will affect the entire planet, and everyone who dwells on the earth.

It's not a storm you want to stay behind and ride-out. Thankfully, you won't have to. **God is going to evacuate you.**

God's evac-plan is the rapture of the church.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Will Be Removed To Heaven Before The Storm Breaks On The Earth, and #2 You Will Be Rewarded In Heaven Before The Storm Breaks On The Earth.

#1 You Will Be Removed To Heaven
Before The Storm Breaks On The Earth

(v1-3)

Do they still teach outlining in school? I always had a hard time with it, because they want you to use a combination of Roman numerals and the English alphabet, and numbers. I could never remember when to capitalize, and when to use parentheses.

We showed you, in chapter one, that the Revelation provides you with its own very simple outline. The apostle John was told to "write the things which [he had] seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this" (1:19).

- The "things [John had seen]" were his vision of the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, in the midst of the golden lampstands, in chapter one.
- The "things which are" were the seven churches in chapters two and three.
- The "things which will take place after this" are the subject of chapters four through twenty-two.

The Revelation is well-organized, and we would add, largely chronological.

Chapter one is in the **past**, when John was exiled on the island of Patmos and received the Revelation.

Chapters two and three are still the **present**. Each letter ends with, "he that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," telling us to pay attention, right now, today, to what Jesus is saying.

Beginning in chapter four, we will see the **future**. We'll see the Tribulation, in chapters six through eighteen; then the Second Coming of Jesus, in chapter nineteen; then the one-thousand year Kingdom of Heaven on earth, in chapter twenty; then eternity, in chapters twenty-one and twenty-two.

Chapters four and five reveal what will go on in Heaven just prior to the Tribulation.

They portray the rapture of the church - the evacuation of the church before the future storm.

Rev 4:1 After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, "Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this."

"After these things," after the churches, John sees "a door standing open in heaven," and he hears "a voice... saying, 'Come up here.'"

Was John really transported to Heaven? Or was his body still on Patmos?

When the apostle Paul was taken to Heaven, he said, "whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows" (Second Corinthians 12:2).

If Paul didn't know, and John doesn't tell us, *then we don't know.*

John's experience, placed just here in the Revelation, between the churches and the Tribulation, between the present and the future, is most definitely a type of the rapture.

You might be unfamiliar with the doctrine of the rapture. It is more properly called the resurrection and rapture of the church, because it involves both saints who have died and saints who are alive when it occurs.

It is taught most clearly in First Corinthians fifteen and in First Thessalonians four.

1Th 4:16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

1Th 4:17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

1Co 15:51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed -

1Co 15:52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

Jesus will return in the air, raise the bodies of the believers who have died, and rapture the believers who are alive. If you're alive, you will be "changed" into your glorified body and together all the believers of the church age will be removed to Heaven.

"Rapture" comes from the word *caught-up* in First Thessalonians 4:17. In the Greek the word is *harpazo* - "to seize upon by force," "to snatch up." In the fourth century AD a guy named Jerome translated the New Testament from the original Greek into Latin. His translation is known as the Vulgate. He rendered the Greek word *harpazo* into the Latin word *raepitius*. This was eventually brought into English as *rapture*.

The "first voice" John heard was that of Jesus back in chapter one. He described it in both places as like a "trumpet."

Trumpets in Scripture are often used to signal an assembling together. We know from First Thessalonians four and from First Corinthians fifteen that a trumpet will sound as the church is caught-up to Heaven.

"Up here," as we'll see momentarily, is in Heaven. John would see the events of the Tribulation from the safety of Heaven. John would be shown the future - the "things which must take place after this." He is shown, in order, the things I already mentioned: the Tribulation, the Second Coming, the Kingdom, and then eternity.

By the way. It has become popular to suggest that much of what the Revelation will describe has already taken place at the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. That cannot be true, because John was writing around 90AD, and Jesus clearly told him the things he would show him were in the future, not in the past.

Rev 4:2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne.

Rev 4:3 And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.

John was "in the Spirit," meaning that whether he was physically in Heaven or not is a moot point. He saw the future from Heaven.

His attention is understandably drawn to the throne of God. His throne is mentioned a perfect seven-times in this chapter. From it we will see terrible, bloody judgments sent out upon the earth.

Here, though, is how **we** relate to the throne today: "let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

John cannot describe God, except to say "like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance."

Without taking anything away from this breathtaking scene, it's OK to ask, *Why these two stones?*

It is a little more than interesting that the Jewish high priest of the Old Testament wore a breastplate adorned with twelve stones, each representing a different tribe of Israel. The first stone in his breastplate was the jasper; the last stone was the sardius (Exodus 28:17-20).

These two stones represent all twelve tribes of Israel.

Thus you have a hint that God is getting ready to deal with His chosen people, Israel. That fact will be confirmed again and again as you read chapters six through eighteen.

One of the primary purposes of the Tribulation is to bring Jews on the earth into the knowledge that Jesus Christ was and remains their Savior. At the end of the Tribulation, all Israel is, in fact, saved (Romans 11:26).

There was also an "emerald" "rainbow around the throne." A little later we're told that "before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal."

Once again, any analysis can only take away from, rather than add to, the incredible beauty of this vision. We can note, however, that while "lightnings, thunderings, and voices" will proceed from the throne like a storm upon the earth, Heaven is calm:

- The "sea" is like glass, solid and smooth.
- There is a permanent rainbow, which we normally associate with the ending of the storm.

Whatever else is meant, **John was safe in Heaven from the storm.**

John was taken to Heaven where he would be safe *before* and *during* the Tribulation that begins in chapter six.

There are other biblical reasons - lots of them - why we understand that the resurrection and rapture of the church will occur pretribulation.

- I showed you in a previous study that the stated purpose of the Tribulation is "to test those who dwell on the earth." That phrase, "those who dwell on the earth," is only, always, used of nonbelievers. The Tribulation is one final severe mercy by God to draw nonbelievers to Himself before it is too late for them to be saved. It is not a time He uses to purify or in any way prepare the church. We're told Jesus does that by "the washing of water by the Word" (Ephesians 5:26).
- Here is another reason we are pretrib. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*. It occurs twenty times in Revelation. Nineteen of those occurrences are in chapters one, two, and three. It occurs again in chapter nineteen when the church is depicted as a bride returning to earth with Jesus in His Second Coming. The church is absent from the discussion of the events on the earth during the Tribulation. In no biblical passage which discusses the Tribulation is the church mentioned. Ever. We will be safe in Heaven.
- Here is another reason we are pretrib. In several passages of the Bible the church is promised exemption and therefore escape from God's wrath. We just studied a Revelation passage, in chapter three, which says, "I also will keep you from

the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth" (3:10). God could certainly keep us safe *through* it, but He has told us He would keep us safe by being removed *from* it.

- Here is another reason we are pretrib. All seven letters to the churches end with the familiar words, "he who has an ear, **let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**" During the Tribulation, you encounter that phrase again; and it reads, "if anyone has an ear, let him hear" (13:9). *Period.* There is no mention of "to the churches," a phrase which is repeated seven times in the seven letters. If the previously mentioned churches were still on the earth during the Tribulation, why are they not addressed? They are not on the earth, that's why.
- Here is another reason we are pretrib. There are a whole host of Scriptures in the New Testament that teach **imminence**. They teach that the Lord's coming for His church could occur *at any moment*, and that there are no signs preceding it. The only way for the rapture to be imminent is for it to happen sometime *before* the Tribulation. Every other theory of the timing of the rapture renders imminence impossible.
- Here is one additional reason we are pretrib. The church, as a whole, is not seen after chapter three until the marriage of the Lamb is discussed in chapter nineteen (v7-9). The church as the bride of Jesus is seen as a complete, definite group in Heaven before the Second Coming of Christ to the earth (19:7 & 11-16). There is no sense that part of the bride is in Heaven and another part is on earth.

The rapture is a forced evacuation ahead of the coming storm. If you are a believer, you'll be caught-up. Nonbelievers will be left behind, so that they can hear the Gospel preached and, hopefully, respond to it by faith in Jesus Christ.

#2 You Will Be Rewarded In Heaven Before The Storm Breaks On The Earth

(v4-11)

Time travel is a staple in the sci-fi genre. It never quite makes sense. It's better you don't try to figure it out. As *Star Trek's* Captain Janeway once insightfully said, "the future is the past, the past is the future. It all gives me a headache."

Unless God is the One showing you the future - which He is in this book.

In the remaining verses of chapter four, He is showing us **our** future, after the rapture, when we will be gathered around His throne in Heaven.

Rev 4:4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.

We say that the "twenty-four elders" are the church. Why?

Let's start with the number twenty-four. There happens to be, in the Old Testament, a significant use of the number twenty-four that we will find helpful.

In First Chronicles we are told how the priests and Levites who served in the Temple were organized. There were twenty-four divisions of priests (24:1-19) and twenty-four divisions of Levites (24:20-31). Each division was assigned a schedule on a rotating basis to minister in the Temple, thus giving everyone the opportunity of serving approximately two weeks each year.

The number twenty-four is a number representative of a larger, complete group.

The "twenty-four elders" are more than two dozen specific persons. The twenty-four elders represent a larger group.

Three features about their description help us identify whether they are human or angels; and, if they are human, exactly who they are.

First, they are "sitting" on thrones. They are not standing, flying, or hovering.

Angels never sit in the presence of God. No verse says that they have ever done so. However, Jesus promised every believer in the church age, "to him who overcomes I will grant to **sit** with Me on My throne, as I also over came and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Revelation 3:21). In Ephesians 2:6 we are told God has made every believer to "**sit** together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

Second, the elders were "clothed in white robes." These words were just used, in chapter three, of believers within the churches (v5 & 18).

Third, the elders had "crowns" on their heads. Believers in the churches were just promised crowns (Revelation 2:10; 3:11). Angels do not wear crowns, but believers can and will wear them.

The twenty-four elders are definitely not angels; they are human.

Could they be saints from the Old Testament? No. According to both Daniel 12:1-3 and Revelation 20:4-6, the believers from the Old Testament period will not be resurrected until the return of Jesus Christ to the earth to establish the Kingdom, and this scene is thirteen chapters before His Second Coming.

The twenty-four elders represent the church. The believers of the church age will be resurrected and raptured prior to the beginning of the Tribulation. The gist of these verses is that we will also have already been rewarded, given crowns to wear.

Rev 4:5 And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

"Lightnings and thunderings" emanating from Heaven usually mean a storm of God's judgment is about to break forth upon the earth.

There are also "voices." There is a scene in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* that captures a sense of voices in a storm. The nine members of the fellowship are attempting to climb Mount Caradhras. A violent snowstorm breaks upon them. As if things were not difficult enough they discern a fell voice in the storm. It's the voice of their enemy, Saruman.

In the Revelation the storm is about to break forth upon the earth. It is God's wrath against sin.

But there are voices in the storm. Throughout the Tribulation God calls upon sinners to repent of their sin and be saved.

1. We'll see Him calling to men through two amazing witnesses. They appear in chapter eleven and witness for one-thousand two hundred sixty days.
2. We'll see God calling to men through one-hundred forty-four thousand Jewish evangelists. They are sealed to serve in chapter fourteen then sent out as voices.
3. In chapter fourteen angels fly through the atmospheric heavens having the everlasting Gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people.

The "seven spirits of God" is an Old Testament name for God the Holy Spirit, derived from Isaiah 11:2. His presence in this scene is represented as "seven lamps of fire burning before the throne."

The Holy Spirit is always invisible unless represented in some way:

1. At the baptism of Jesus He was represented in the form of a dove descending upon the Lord.
2. At the birth of the church He was represented by tongues of fire resting above the believers gathered in the upper room.

It reminds us that when the Holy Spirit is at work He is bringing glory to Jesus Christ and focusing attention on the Lord. If He is at work in us we will *not* bring attention to ourselves. We will focus everyone's attention on the Lord.

We should work hard to be invisible as we serve.

God gave Noah the rainbow as a sign that He would keep His promises to him and to the human race. Among other things, the rainbow around the throne lets us know God will keep all His promises, and that the Tribulation will not end the human race, but will redeem it.

Rev 4:6 Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal...

The Jewish Tabernacle and Temple on earth were copies of a Temple in Heaven. In them was a brass laver, a wash basin. The wash basin was a type of this sea of glass.

Rev. 4:6 ... And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.

Rev 4:7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle.

"Creatures" is an unfortunate translation. The word means *living ones*. They are a type of angel. They resemble the cherubim that the prophet Ezekiel saw in his vision of the throne (Ezekiel 1:4-14; 10:20-22), but their praise reminds us of the seraphim Isaiah saw in his vision of the throne (Isaiah 6).

Weird description? Yes. Remember, John was doing his best to describe the beauty of what he saw. Even inspired by the Holy Spirit, it was difficult to convey these angels in words.

Something to notice about his description that just cannot be a coincidence. In the Old Testament book of Numbers, God told the nation of Israel how they were to set up camp around the

Tabernacle in the wilderness. Each of the four sides were to be encamped by three tribes.

- The tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulon were to camp on the east and were collectively called the camp of Judah. What was the symbol on the flag of Judah? A lion.
- The tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin were to camp on the west side and were collectively called the camp of Ephraim. What was the symbol on the flag of Ephraim? An ox.
- The tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad were to camp on the south side and were collectively called the camp of Reuben. What was the symbol on the flag of Reuben? A man.
- The tribes of Dan, Naphtali, and Asher were to camp on the north side and were collectively called the camp of Dan. What was the symbol on the flag of Dan? An eagle.

Through the storm, the Tribulation, that we will witness safely from Heaven, God will be dealing with Israel - bringing them to faith in their Messiah, Jesus.

Rev 4:8 The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!"

Rev 4:9 Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever,
Rev 4:10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

Rev 4:11 "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."

"Crowns" will be received as rewards when we stand before Jesus Christ, at His reward seat, after the rapture.

In Heaven, we will worship by casting crowns. Are we getting ready for it?

The Bible mentions five crowns available to Christians:

1. The imperishable crown is described in First Corinthians 9:24-25, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an **imperishable**." This crown will be rewarded to those who had spiritual discipline, and exercised self-control.
2. The crown of righteousness is described by Paul in Second Timothy 4:1, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the **crown of righteousness**, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing." Paul was clear to indicate that this crown was not only for him, but was also available to any believer who loves, and thus lives for, the appearing of Christ.
3. The crown of life is mentioned in Revelation 2:10 where we read, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the **crown of life**." This has sometimes been called a martyr's crown, something reserved for those who die as a result of their faith in Christ. It may apply more broadly to those who persevere through difficulties and persecution of many kinds. James 1:12 says, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for

when he has stood the test he will receive the **crown of life**, which God has promised to those who love him."

4. The crown of rejoicing is mentioned in First Thessalonians 2:19 by Paul: "For what is our hope or joy or **crown of rejoicing**? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?" It's unclear whether this crown is given for soul-winning or for general service to other believers.
5. The crown of glory is described by Peter in First Peter 5:4, saying, "and when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading **crown of glory**." Peter was writing to elders or local church leaders. Those who serve well as leaders in the church will receive an eternal crown of glory.

This text prompted Charles Spurgeon to observe, "there will be no *crown-wearers* in Heaven who were not *cross-bearers* here below."

Don't focus on any particular crown; don't focus on crowns at all. Look to the Cross of Jesus Christ, bear your cross daily, and you'll have crowns to cast.