

HEAVEN – Part Four
“What Did John See?”
Sermon – March 3, 2019

Last week we looked at what Jesus had to say about Heaven while He was on earth. This week we are going to look at what Heaven is like as seen by the Apostle John. You may remember that in the Book of Revelation the Apostle John was visited by Jesus and given messages to seven different churches. After the messages were given something extraordinary happened to John. Here, in his own words, is what happened.

REVELATION 4:1-11

“After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in Heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.’

“Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in Heaven, and One sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. Around the throne were twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.

“Out from the throne came flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind.

“The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.

“And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast theirs before the throne saying, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

The next thing John sees happening in Heaven is the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world who is found worthy to open some kind of book. Before the Lamb breaks the seals to open the book,

“The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls of incense, which are the prayers of the saint. And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom of priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.’

“Then (John) looked, and (he) heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and glory and blessing,’ And every created thing which is in Heaven and on the earth and on the sea and all things in them, I heard

saying, 'To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.' And the four living creatures kept saying, 'Amen.' And the elders fell down and worshipped."

The language John uses is very descriptive, full of symbolism and meaning. Many other things happened in Heaven while John was there in the Spirit, much of which uses symbolic language as well. We will address some of this later. But let's see what we can discover from what we have seen so far.

First of all there are some strange creatures in Heaven. There are certainly some strange creatures on earth, especially in the depths of the sea, but none as strange as the four living creatures John saw standing in the center and around the throne. Creatures that look like a lion, a calf, or a flying eagle, and one that had a face like that of a man; and each one of them had six wings which were full of eyes around and within.

I don't know if this is an accurate description of something real or if John is describing something symbolic. Ezekiel saw something similar to these same creatures when he had his vision, though he also added that they had human forms and human hands under their wings. So both Ezekiel and John saw very similar creatures in Heaven. If these creatures are merely symbolic of something else we may have to wait to enter heaven to find out what the symbolism is. But if they are real it seems to me that no matter how strange we appear on earth we won't appear as strange as these creatures in heaven. It seems all kind of strangeness is welcome in heaven. That should encourage those of us who have been called or consider ourselves strange because there is a place for strangeness in Heaven.

The flashes of lightening and the sound of thunder coming from the throne are reminiscent of the thunder, lightning, smoke and trumpet sound that occurred when God came down to Mount Sinai in the wilderness to speak to Moses and the people of Israel. This gives credence to the fact that the same God who spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai is the same God now speaking to John in Heaven.

From the description of the throne we get the picture that Heaven is very colorful. The stones which are used to describe the One who was sitting on the throne had many colors attributed to them. Jasper is a multicolored stone which can be brown, yellow, or reddish in color as well as mottled green, orange, or black. The sardius is probably a ruby or carnelian which is red or brownish red in color. The rainbow around the throne is described as an emerald which is a deep green in color. So it appears there are many colors in heaven, at least around the throne. Heaven is not a black and white place. It's a place full of many deep, rich colors. We'll see more of this in the weeks ahead.

What we also notice is that there is much singing in Heaven. This singing revolves around worshipping the One who sits on the throne. So it appears that worshipping our Savior with singing will continue in heaven. It also says they sang a new song. So it appears that the creation of new songs (and perhaps other things) will occur in heaven. This is good news for all who love to write music. Their creativity will follow them into heaven where they will be able to create new songs of worship to the Lord. Perhaps composers such as Bach who, while on earth dedicated his music to the Lord, has continued to write new symphonies and choral works during his time on Heaven.

We also see that no one is left out of the worship. Those who have received great honor after death continue to fall down in worship before the throne of God. The twenty-four elders are an example of this as they cast the crowns which they received for their faithful service before the throne of the Lamb in worship.

We also see what is called "responsive readings". The voice of many angels and the living creatures and the elders spoke in unison, saying, "*Worthy is the Lamb*". And John heard all created

things in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them say in unison, *“To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.”* No one refuses to give honor to the Lord for what He has accomplished on their behalf. We also see the four living creatures continually say “Amen” after each declaration of worship to the Lord.

What struck me as interesting about the things which John saw are the various types of worship occurring in Heaven. We hear singing, we hear responsive reading, we see worshippers falling down, we see worship which seems unending because it says, “Day and night they do not cease” to praise the Lord, we hear new songs and we hear “Amens”. It seems we also have spontaneous worship as well as directed worship.

I find this interesting because there are many different types of worship in our churches today. People frequently make their choice on what church to attend not because of a particular doctrine alone but also because of their particular style of worship. Some churches spend a long time in singing while others restrict it to only a few songs. Some churches like to respond with an “Amen” after hearing something with which they agree, while others prefer their service without interruption.

Some churches have their congregations read in unison the words of prayer or Scripture printed in their bulletin or their hymnals. Others do no responsive reading at all. Some congregations make space in the front so people can come and fall down in worship as they praise the Lord. Others are uncomfortable with that type of expression and prefer to provide a separate room for such expressions.

I mention this because it seems that no matter what type of worship you may have preferred or experienced on earth it will still be happening in Heaven. I have attended Black churches where the “Amen” is heard loud and clear. I have attended Charismatic and Pentecostal churches where the worship seems spontaneous and never ending where worshippers frequently fall down as they worship. I have attended churches where people throw their money down at the front of the Sanctuary as a symbol of their gratitude for what Christ has done for them.

I have attended Presbyterian churches where responsive reading is still very much alive and well while people remain in their pews for the entire service. I have attended Catholic and Lutheran churches which follow a particular pattern of worship where everything has its place and nothing is out of place. I have also been in congregations where the pastor and the elders join together with the worship leaders and the congregation to worship the living God. No one remained seated or stayed detached from the worship that is occurring.

When we are in Heaven it appears that all worship is acceptable and used to worship the King of kings and Lord of Lords. This is encouraging for it appears that no matter what method of worship we prefer on earth, there will still be opportunities in Heaven to experience the same. No method of worship is seen as superior to another in Heaven. All will worship with abandon. All will be able to worship in the style to which they are accustomed. My point is this: God accepts all forms of true worship. He rejects none of them. Though we will most likely find our particular style of worship happening in Heaven, I don't believe we will be as uncomfortable in Heaven with different worship styles. As people in love with the Lamb we'll be comfortable worshipping like the Charismatics or the Pentecostals or the Presbyterians or the Baptists or the Lutherans or the Catholics or the Black church because the focus will not be on us but on the Lord.

After observing this worship John describes the opening of a book which no one is worthy to open except the Lamb. As the Lamb opens the seals of this book many things occur in Heaven and on earth. We won't look at that today but save those events for next time. I want to concentrate today on what John sees happening in Heaven after the events on earth are completed. Here is what he said:

REVELATION 20:11-15

“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.

“And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, each one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

There are many interpretations of what these books are and what the difference is between The Book of Life and the other books which were opened. Revelation also speaks of the Lamb’s Book of Life which may be the same as The Book of Life but may also be a different book. It is difficult to discern for certain what these books are. I have read a lot of what commentators have to say about these different books and they do not all agree - most because of their predisposed theology. So I’m going to give you the simplest explanation of what these books are and the one in which I have the most confidence Still, I am not an expert and what I have concluded may be wrong.

I believe The Book of Life is a book in which the name of everyone who ever lived is written. Though all have sinned, God calls everyone to repentance and therefore the promise of eternal life is there for everyone to receive. The Scripture does speak of people being blotted out of God’s Book, meaning they were once in the Book but have been taken out. This is consistent with God offering salvation to all but not all choosing to receive the promise of eternal life.

Before we go too far down this road we need to acknowledge that there may be another book in which God has written names. In Exodus Moses pleads for the people of Israel after they have sinned and says this:

EXODUS 32:32

“The Moses returned to the Lord, and said, ‘Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. But now, if you will, forgive their sins – and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot him out of My book. But go now, lead the people where I told you.’ ”

The book Moses mentions is not called The Book of Life. This term “book of life” is not used until the New Testament. So we have to figure out whether the book Moses is speaking about is The Book of life or another book altogether. In order to answer that we have to determine exactly what Moses is saying to God. Is Moses saying, “If you will not forgive the sin of these people then take my life in place of the others?” Or is he saying, “If you will not forgive these people then let me take their place in the lake of eternal fire?” I believe he is saying the later. I don’t believe Moses is willing to suffer the wrath of God. He is only asking to die in the place of these rebellious people rather than see them suffer death. This is consistent with other Scriptures such as Psalm 109 and 2 Kings 14.

PSALM 109:13

“Let his posterity be cut off; in a following generation let their name be blotted out.”

2 KINGS 14:27

“The Lord did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, but

He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.”

As you can see, these additional verses confirm that there is also a book of the living which includes the names of all who are currently alive on earth. Names are blotted out of this book only after death meaning there will be no more mention of them as being alive on earth. You and I and everyone here today have their names written in this book of the living. But all our names will be blotted out from this book when we die.

If this is true, then why did God say to Moses, “*Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot him out of My book.*” If we keep this verse in its context then we can discover its true meaning. God had just given Moses the stone tablets upon which He had written the Ten Commandments. One of these commandments stated that Israel should have no other God other than the Lord. The punishment for disobeying this command was death. So Moses was pleading with God not to kill the entire nation of Israel over their sin of worshipping false gods. God heeded Moses’ plea and spared the nation. But God also told Moses that he would indeed blot out everyone who sinned against him. As you may recall everyone who walked with Moses toward the Promised Land (with the exception of Joshua and Caleb) continually sinned against God and as a result died in the wilderness. As promised, those who had sinned against Him were blotted out of the book of the living.

Though this seems to be a different book it is very similar to The Book of Life, so let’s go back now to The Book of Life and the “other books” which were opened. In all probability The Book of Life does contain the names of all those destined for eternal life. It may be the same as The Lamb’s Book of Life but is different than the other books which are opened. The key lies in what is done with these books and how they are mentioned. Revelation 20 says,

REVELATION 20:12-13

“And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds....and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.”

The first thing we notice is that the dead are judged. The second thing is that they are judged according to their deeds. This tells us that these are not believers standing before the throne for Jesus said in John chapter 5:

JOHN 5:24

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”

Believers do not come into judgment after death. They have already passed out of death and into life. As Romans 8:1 says, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” We are not judged to be worthy of heaven by the deeds we do on earth. Neither do we stand before God on our own merit but solely on the merit of Christ alone. So these are people who have died without believing in the shed blood of Christ for their salvation. These are those who are judged according to their deeds alone. Whatever they said and did, or failed to do or say, will be the deciding points in determining their eternal destination after death.

Anyone who has ever wished to be judged based on their own personal merit will get their chance when they find themselves standing before the Judge of all the earth; For He has seen and heard everything that occurred over the course of their life and has written it all down in His books. For that reason you might call these “”books” the Books of Recorded Deeds. How awful to be judged by the things we did or failed to do over the course of our entire life. I’m sure the speaking aloud of the things we did on earth while standing at the throne of God in front of the angels and all the dead will not be pleasant for anyone. For even the so-called “good” deeds we do are not seen as righteous in the eyes of the Lord unless they are covered by the blood of the Lamb. Those of us who are believers can thank God that our names are already written in The Book of Life.

Remember God saying to Moses that He will blot out of His book everyone who sins against Him? Well this does not just apply to the book of the living but also to The Book of Life; for after the judgment of the dead Revelation goes on to say this:

REVELATION 20:15

“Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

After the books of recorded deeds are opened The Book of Life is also opened. The deeds of the dead are used as judgement against them, exposing their attempts at self-righteousness and their refusal to accept God’s forgiveness in Christ. This is confirmed by looking at The Book of Life which does not contain their names. They are therefore thrown into the lake of fire where the devil, the false prophet, and the beast have already been thrown.

God may have written every person’s name in The Book of Life at their conception, but that does not mean it will remain there until their death. This Scripture tells us that The Book of Life contains the names of those who are destined for eternal life. It does not contain the names of those destined for Hell. So if any of our names were written in The Book of Life at our conception but we subsequently refused to accept the free gift of salvation offered through Christ prior to our death, then we will not find our names written there any longer. Our names will have been blotted out because we did not accept the free gift of salvation found through belief in His Son. As a result, on the Day of Judgment we will find ourselves held solely accountable for our sin and our unbelief.

Further proof of this concept comes from Revelation 3 which speaks about overcoming and Revelation 21 which speaks about those who are allowed entry into Heaven.

REVELATION 3:5

“He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”

REVELATION 21:27

“And nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

Revelation 3 speaks of The Book of Life from which names can be erased. And Revelation 21 speaks of the Lamb’s Book of Life on which only believer’s names appear. So it seems we have the book of the living which contains the names of all those currently alive on earth. Then we have “books” (that I call the Books of Recorded Deeds”) which contain all the thoughts and deeds of all who lived on the earth without faith in Christ. And we also have The Book of Life and The Lamb’s Book of Life which only

contain the names of those who are destined for eternal life because of their confession of faith in Christ.

Based on their revealed content, it appears that The Book of Life and The Lamb's Book of Life contain the same names. Why then two different names? I do not know, but I will hazard a guess. In Revelation 13:8 The Book of Life is referred to as The Book of Life of the Lamb. So I suggest there is only one book and that is The Book of Life which contains only the names of those who believe in the Lamb. It is later called The Lamb's Book of Life because once those who rejected Christ have been dealt with there is no need for any other book to exist. The only names found in this book are the names of those for whom the Lamb died. There is life in no other. There is no other life than the life lived in the Lamb. Hence the final name – The Lamb's Book of Life.

Whether what I have just presented about the books described in Scripture is accurate or someone else's view is more accurate one thing remains upon which we all agree. There are books in Heaven which will be used to determine our eternal destiny. Anyone whose name is not found written in The Book of Life or The Lamb's book of Life will not gain entrance into Heaven but will be judged by the deeds they have done on earth. Since we are told that there is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved but the name of Jesus (and that it is not by works that we are saved but only through the gift of God's grace alone) we should pay heed to the call of God to repent and believe in His Son for our salvation. This will ensure our names are written in The Lamb's Book of Life. There is only judgment coming from the Books of our deeds. But there is life eternal coming from The Lamb's Book of Life. We should all make sure before we die that our name is written there. Amen?

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