

Soon . . . and Very Soon!

The First Hymns of Heaven – Part I

Revelation 4:1-3

Introduction

In September of last year, *USA Today* ran the results of a survey conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons. The survey revealed that the majority of people 50 years old and older believe in life after death.

The same statistics nearly hold up for younger people as well.

Of the people surveyed, 94% claimed to believe in the existence of an eternal God and an eternal heaven. More than half of them said that their belief in heaven had increased as they had gotten older.ⁱ

No doubt, the older we get, the more we think about life after death, right?

Whether young or old, believer or unbeliever, there is an intuitive sense of something out there beyond our own lives. Books and movies having to do with life after death gain a lot of attention, not to mention books written by people who have claimed to have had a near death experience and have returned from either heaven or hell to tell their story.

The sense that we will live forever somewhere has shaped every civilization in human history. Even secular anthropologists have noted this unifying thought. One author catalogued: Australian aborigines believe in a distant island beyond the western horizon. The early Finns believed it was an island in the faraway east. Peruvians and Polynesians believed that they went to live on the sun or the moon after death. Native Americans believed that their spirits would hunt the spirits of buffalo. The pyramids of Egypt, filled with treasures, maps and even servants put to death alongside the rich and politically powerful, gave testimony to the Egyptian belief that they would need servants and money and direction in the coming afterlife.ⁱⁱ

Even the first century pagan Roman philosopher Seneca once said that a person's last day on earth was the birthday of their eternity.

Every culture has the unifying testimony of belief in some kind of conscious existence after death.

Solomon tells us why as he writes in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that God has implanted the truth of eternity in the heart of mankind.

Anyone who says they do not believe in life after death is suppressing the truth, just as they suppress the truth of their Creator (Romans 1:18).

For the believer, one of the great delights of Christianity, if not one of its chief distinctives, is the revelation of our Lord regarding life after death.

Christ left nothing to mysticism or guesswork. He left no room for fear of limbo; of floating endlessly in some sort of eternal consignment to wander the earth as a disembodied spirit or ghost.

The apostle Paul wrote,

. . . to be absent from the body [that is, through death] is to be [present] with the Lord. (II Corinthians 5:8b NASB)

Jesus Christ made the amazing claim, as God incarnate,

. . . I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, (John 11:25)

This is a distinctive doctrine of Christianity.

Many followers of religions and "isms" in the world believe that when they die, they come back again and again until they get it right, ultimately becoming one with God, while others believe they go on to become a god.

Christianity says we go to live with God, retaining our distinctive personality and unique persona, though given a perfected spirit and glorified body as we enter the new heaven and the new earth. We do not get absorbed into God; we do not become a god; we rule and reign with God.

This belief is the fabric of the Christian faith.

So, we discover, deep in the catacombs of Rome, on the tombs of second century Christians martyred for their faith in Christ, inscriptions that read, with confidence, their belief in life with God after death. These inscriptions include:

- "He who lives with God";

- “He was taken up into his eternal home”;
- “In Christ, Alexander is not dead, but lives.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These early Christians had simply believed the record of the apostles.

This is like Paul’s words, when he wrote to the Philippians,

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is [even better]. (Philippians 1:21)

Why, Paul? “Because dying means I get to depart.”

. . . and be with Christ, for that is far better. (Philippians 1:23)

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth,

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord,

for we walk by faith, not by sight.

. . . we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

(II Corinthians 5:6-8)

For the believer, death is simply the hand that opens the doorway into heaven. This is not morbid thinking – it is faith rooted in certainty.

Amy Carmichael, the famous missionary to India for many years, lived as a semi-invalid until her death in 1951. She died in India, her beloved country. In her later years, she was visited by an elderly woman friend who, in the course of their conversation, said to Amy, “You know, my doctor has warned me, ‘Don’t ever bend over suddenly, or you might die on the spot.’”

Amy responded with a twinkle in her eye, “However do you resist the temptation?”^{iv}

This is not some morbid or depressed thought – it is the expression of faith in what God told us about life after death.

It is no wonder that the apostle Paul, who had already been given a personal tour of heaven in the spirit, said, “I’d really rather be there than here.”

Fifty years after John recorded the book of Revelation, a Greek man named Aristides wrote a letter to a friend and spoke with some amazement about the Christians who lived in his city. He wrote, “If a Christian passes from this world, they all rejoice and offer thanks to God, and they escort his body to the grave with songs and thanksgiving as if he were merely setting out from one place to another place nearby.”^v

What faith!

Perhaps our courage about the future is not as strong as it should be because our view of heaven is weaker than it should be. Maybe our faith in facing the future is not deeper because our understanding of heaven is superficial.

The apostle Paul comforted the church by telling it about heaven (I Thessalonians 4).

The apostle Peter strengthened the resolve of the suffering believer by reminding him of heaven (I Peter 1).

Our Lord Himself, in fact, comforted His disciples by telling them about heaven (John 14).

Could it be that we do not think about and talk about and study about heaven nearly enough?

Do we really believe that soon . . .and very soon, we are going to see the King?

For this reason and many more, I am thrilled to begin with you a series of studies on the vision of John which now sweeps us into the throne room of heaven and his eyewitness account.

The End of the Church Age

We have arrived at Revelation 4:1.

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

Notice that the verse begins and ends with the phrase “after this”.

This is from “meta tauta (μετα ταυτα),” a phrase that appears often in Revelation to transition the reader to a new vision of John the Apostle.^{vi}

A new vision indicates a new series of events.

Earlier, in chapters 2 and 3, John had focused our attention on God the Son speaking to the churches on earth.

Now the scene shifts and the church is speaking to God the Father in heaven, along with some very strange looking creatures, as we will see later on.

This explains the absence of the church from Revelation chapter 4 all the way to chapter 19.^{vii}

So, from the beginning of the tribulation, when God begins to pour out His judgment and wrath upon the earth, the church is not seen until the end of the tribulation and the marriage supper of the Lamb, in chapter 19.

By the way, this fits perfectly with the promise of Christ to the church age, which is given in His letter to the faithful church in Philadelphia. You may remember that He said to them,

. . . I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world . . . (Revelation 3:10)

In other words, “*terew ek (τηρεω εκ)*,” “I will take you away from the testing that will cover the earth.”

This promise of the Lord is the same promise delivered by Paul in I Thessalonians 5:9, when he writes,

For God has not appointed us for wrath . . .

Even more specifically, Paul refers to the wrath of God in I Thessalonians 1:10, when he writes,

. . . [you] wait for his Son from heaven . . . Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

This is the promise to the church age. From first century Thessalonica and Philadelphia to the twenty-first century, we live under the promise that God’s wrath will never be poured out upon the church – not ever.

This cannot be a reference to the judgment of God at the great white throne and the sentence of eternal wrath from God described in Revelation 20. The church has never feared that wrath.

In fact, the church will not even be standing before the great white throne in fear of God’s wrath. We will actually be judging the unbelievers who stand at the great white throne as they are given the verdict of eternal punishment by God (I Corinthians 6:2).

So what wrath from God would the church fear? From what would God desire to encourage the church in Thessalonica and Philadelphia by promising to take them away, literally “remove them altogether out of the reach of”?^{viii}

It is this wrath of God, this coming terror of God that will cover the whole earth during this period of universal tribulation on earth. And the church is promised to be taken out and away – “rapturo,” the Latin word for “caught away,” or “raptured”. We will be caught away to meet the Lord in the air (I Thessalonians 4:17).

A pre-tribulation rapture of the church is important to understand if we hope to literally interpret and fully grasp the predominate focus of the tribulation. It is not on preparing the church by purifying her, it is to prepare Israel.

I have often heard the view that the church needs to go through the tribulation so that she will be purified before eternity. This is a tragic view that undercuts our current position and standing as even now, the purified, forgiven, redeemed, blood-washed bride of Christ.

Furthermore, this view panders to the Roman Catholic creation of purgatory – without one verse of scripture to support it – a place concocted for their own religious purposes where the saints are punished and purified by the fire of purgatory and then allowed into heaven by the directive of Mary.

There is no “in-between” purification of the believer to make him fit for heaven. It is not needed because, in fact, the believer is already fit!

There is . . . now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

The tribulation is not to prepare the church for her Bridegroom; it is predominantly designed to prepare Israel for her King. It is to ready Israel as an ethnic people, redeemed and then receptive of their true Messiah whom they shall look upon, the One whom they pierced.

So John writes in Revelation chapter 4, “After this”. That is, after the church age is ended and the church is raptured, the tribulation will unfold; God will judge the world, and specifically Israel, who by and large will be redeemed and readied for the coming of the Lord.

This opens our understanding that the focus of the tribulation is not on the church, but on Israel. So:

- Israel is seen during the tribulation as the woman bearing the male child (Revelation 12);
- the 144,000 evangelists who are sealed and who effectively win millions to faith in the Son of God, from all tribes and tongues, are Jewish evangelists from the twelve tribes of Israel (Revelation 7);
- the focus is once again on the temple of God (Revelation 11);
- the two witnesses in Revelation 11 are Jewish believers;
- Jerusalem is the scene of the great earthquake (Revelation 11);
- the rest of her offspring are Jews who are persecuted by the antichrist (Revelation 12).

The Jewishness of the tribulation throughout Revelation chapters 4 through 19 is so obvious and so strong that some critics of Revelation have objected

that the book of Revelation is little more than Christianized Judaism.^{ix}

Okay, enough of this – I just wanted to explain the first two words of Revelation 4:1 – all that is bound up in the words “after this”.

The Location of Heaven

After the end of the church age, John writes further, in Revelation 4:1,

. . . I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! . . .

This door will provide access for John to be transported in spirit into the third heaven. He hears the voice saying, in Revelation 4:1b,

. . . “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

What is “after this”? It is after the church age.

Continue to Revelation 4:2a.

At once I was in the Spirit . . .

In other words, John’s body is on earth, but his spirit is taken to heaven.

This begs another introductory question, “Where is heaven?”

Where is heaven located? The voice said, in Revelation 4:1b,

. . . “Come up here . . .”

Heaven is obviously up. We are starting with the easy part!

In fact, the Hebrew word translated “heaven,” or “shamayim,” means, “height”. It is a plural word which literally means “great heights” or “at the highest height”. The Greek word for heaven, or “ouranos,” from which we get the name of our planet Uranus, means “an elevated place” or “a place that is highly lifted up”.

So heaven is a place that is raised up, elevated far above the planets and our solar system; in fact, I believe it is at the apex of God’s created universe.^x

Remember, at His incarnation, Jesus came down to the earth, and when He left at His ascension, He went up. In fact, Paul wrote, when Christ ascended,

He . . . ascended far above all the heavens . . . (Ephesians 4:10)

Christ ascended to the very top, as it were, of the universe.

When Jesus comes again, at the end of the church age – between Revelation chapter 3 and the beginning of what we see unfolding in Revelation

chapter 4 – He will descend down from heaven and the church will be raptured up to heaven (I Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The new Jerusalem, in Revelation 21, will descend; come down from heaven.

Satan boasted that he would be exalted and ascend to heaven, and he threatened to place his throne on the mount and ascend above the far reaches of the north (Isaiah 14:13).

Heaven is a real place and it is located at the highest point of the universe – elevated far above the planets, beyond the galaxies and the solar systems that we have been able to discover.

John is transported immediately to this place.

The three heavens

Understand that the Bible teaches there are three heavens. In fact, Paul specifically said he was caught up to the third heaven in II Corinthians 12:2. So what are these three heavens?

- 1. The first heaven refers to the lower atmosphere that immediately surrounds planet earth. It is called, in our science textbooks, the troposphere.**

This is the heaven we see above us, in which clouds float by and birds chase one another. The prophet Isaiah referred to this stratum of heaven when he wrote that,

. . . the rain and the snow come down from heaven . . . (Isaiah 55:10a)

David wrote that God,

. . . covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth . . . (Psalm 147:8a)

The first heaven then, is the air we breathe and the sky that is above us colored in beautiful blue.

- 2. The second heaven spoken of in the Bible is above the first heaven. It is what we call outer space – the dwelling place of all the planets, stars, and billions of galaxies, each containing billions of celestial bodies.**

In Genesis chapter 1, God speaks of the heavens where lights will be that separate the day from the night; a reference to the sun, moon, and stars. Genesis 1:17 says,

And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth.

3. The third heaven is the abode of God and the heavenly host.

We read texts like Psalm 33, where David writes,

The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man;

from where he sits enthroned he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth,

(Psalm 33:13-14)

It is here that John is transported in spirit.

Heaven is a literal place. It is not a figment of our imaginations. It is not a tweak of some dial into some parallel universe. It is a place that will descend in the future. It contains a city with real streets and real buildings and real gates and real travel and real people. Jesus Christ said,

. . . I go to prepare a place for you . . .

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

(John 14:2b-3)

Soon . . . and very soon, we are going to a place.

The average Christian has come to view heaven as some nebulous wispy cloud upon which we sit and strum our harps, or some palace courtyard where we will stand around and wonder how in the world we will ever keep from being bored to death, but are afraid to admit it.

Heaven is a real place. Gates and streets and buildings are literal. This is not too good to be true.

Above the atmosphere; beyond the troposphere; beyond the stratosphere; beyond the mesosphere and ionosphere; way beyond the galaxies is the throne of God – who is both seated and omnipresent.

The angels whisk their way between heaven and earth, traveling at speeds we cannot imagine.

This is the place where Christ ascended and the place He has prepared for His bride.

This is for real.^{xi}

“Come up here, John, come up to heaven!”

The Throne of God

Look at Revelation 4:2.

At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.

Mark this as it is obviously, as we will see, God the Father, and He is seated – distinguished in Revelation chapter 5 from the Lamb of God.

Being “seated” is a posture describing the position of an emperor who is currently reigning.

We use the term today to talk about a politician being seated – or having a seat on the floor of Congress. If a politician is seated, he is in office. If an incumbent loses an election, he becomes unseated.

This is a clear reference to the sovereign, ruling, directing power of God. He is not resting, He is reigning!^{xii}

His throne is going to appear over and over again throughout this revelation. In fact, we could circle the word “throne,” which appears twelve times in chapter 4 alone, specifically referencing the throne of God.

John sees God the Father seated on the throne, but His figure is lost in the dazzling display of light that surrounds His throne.

Notice, in Revelation 4:3, that John sees God the Father surrounded by,

. . . the appearance of jasper and carnelian...

John has no vocabulary to describe the brilliant light surrounding the throne of God, so he uses the words “the appearance of,” which we could render, “like”. He stumbles over the inadequacy of language.

This is like asking a young man who is head over heels in love with a young lady to describe her. He might say, “Well, she’s, you know, totally, like amazing . . . it’s incredible . . . she’s better than, you know, like it’s just something else . . . totally like that, you know what I mean?” Okay!

John is saying this is as close as he can get to describing what he saw.

These two precious gems are more than likely the diamond. The crystal clear description in Revelation 21 allows us to envision this stone more like the brilliance of a diamond.

In other words, the shining, flashing facets of the glory of God are compared to a diamond, refracting all the colors of the spectrum.^{xiii}

The next stone, the sardius, it should be translated, is the fiery, deep red stone. In fact, this Greek word is the word from which the city of Sardis was named.^{xiv}

It is interesting that these two stones were the first and last gemstones on the breastplate of the high priest. They represented the firstborn and the lastborn sons of Jacob. It is as if they are to symbolize that even though the wrath of God is about to be unleashed on planet earth, primarily upon

Israel, God's covenant with the sons of Israel will not be destroyed – He will keep His promises to ethnic Israel.

John further notes in Revelation 4:3 that,

. . . around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.

In other words, around the throne, the color of the rainbow, perhaps due to all the other colors flashing from the throne, came across as predominantly green.

By the way, even though these descriptions are difficult to understand or even picture in our minds, they are not trivial decorations thrown into the vision.

A rainbow would immediately draw the believer to the allusion of God's grace seen in His promise to Noah and in the covenant sign of the rainbow to literally, all of humanity.

At the throne of God is a wonderful reminder that God's mercy is as great as His majesty.^{xv}

The first thing that John is arrested by is this magnificent, brilliant, light show emanating from the throne of God.

Ladies and gentlemen, God's throne of glory is active – at this very moment. For every believer, this is the testimony of God's power and reign. His throne is secure! It is permanent! It is immovable and enduring and unchangeable! It is impartial and eternal!

No matter what we see on CNN; no matter what we read in the newspapers and watch on television screens; no matter how sad or glad or fearful or troubling – everything takes place under the “shadow of the sovereign throne of God.”^{xvi}

It has been sixty years since Pentecost and the church could easily wonder, along with the last living apostle, “I thought the gates of Hades wouldn't overpower the church? I thought we'd be a worldwide movement by now. I thought we'd influence Caesar and reshape culture. Instead we're being persecuted and Caesar is silencing our witness and Roman culture is more corrupt than ever.”

And the last living apostle who is seeing visions of glory is exiled on a little island – his voice all but snuffed out.

The message to the church is, “Don't mistake what you see with what is. Don't evaluate the power of the church by CNN. Don't determine the effectiveness of the church and the power of God on the basis of world views.”

God is not idle – He is active. God is not unseated – He is not up for re-election. God is not

absent or distant or forgetful or uncaring – He is unveiling and orchestrating the events of human history.

A.W. Tozer wrote,

To regain her lost power, the church must see heaven opened and have a transforming vision of God . . . not the utilitarian God who is having a run of popularity today, whose chief claim to men's attention is His ability to bring them success; the God we must learn to know is the Majesty in the heavens; He it is that sitteth upon the circle of the earth who stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain; who bringeth out His starry host by number and calleth them all by names through the greatness of His power.^{xvii}

Heaven is not a state of mind and the throne of heaven is not a figment of our imaginations used as a crutch for our weary souls.

Heaven is a real place – and God is seated upon His throne – and that is true comfort and assurance for the weary soul.

Soon . . . and very soon, we are going to see the King.

Conclusion

I will close with a conversation.

Pastor and freelance writer Mark Buchanan tells about a conversation he had with a young philosophy student in his early twenties. Mark had officiated a wedding on a gorgeous day on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, and at the reception the student asked Mark if he really believed all that religious stuff he had spouted at the church.

Mark writes:

I said I did. He smirked. I asked him what he believed. “I tried your religion for a while,” he said. “I found it's just a burden to carry. You know what I've figured out? Life justifies living. Life is its own reward and explanation. I don't need some pie-in-the-sky mirage to keep me going. This life has enough pleasure and mystery and adventure in it not to need anything else to account for it. Life justifies living.”

“Good,” I said. “And I believe you. Today, here and now, feel the warmth of that breeze, listen to the laughter of those people, smell the spiciness of that shrimp cooking, look at the blueness of the sky. Yes, today I believe you. What a superb philosophy. Life justifies living. Bravo!”

“Only, I’m thinking about someone I met last February. Richard. Richard was 44, looked 60, and had been living on the streets since he was 12. He was a junkie. Now he has AIDS.”

Mark wrote, “The last time I saw Richard was on a gray, rainy day in winter. I bought him a bus ticket and put him on the bus. He was going to his mother’s home in Calgary. He hadn’t spoken with her in almost fifteen years, but he was hoping he could go home to die. Almost incoherent, he sputtered, ‘I wish I’d never been born. My whole life has been a mistake. My whole life has been misery.’”

“I’m thinking about Richard.”

“And I’m thinking about Ernie. Ernie was a man on the rise. While he was in his twenties, he was already vice president of a thriving national business. He was tough-minded, hard-driving, prodigiously skilled, hugely ambitious. He was a superb athlete, a natural at any sport. He had a beautiful wife. They were unable to have children of their own, so they adopted four, three from Africa and one from Mexico. On the day the fourth adoption became final, Ernie got the results back from some medical tests he had undergone to account for some dizziness, blurring of eyesight, and tingling in his hands. The tests came back with stunning news: Ernie had multiple sclerosis.”

“Yes, I’m thinking about Richard and Ernie. And I have a question about your philosophy: How exactly do I explain to them that life justifies living?”

The young philosophy student had no response. He said he’d have to think about it and get back to me. I gave him my address and asked him to write me when he came up with something. I never heard from him, [and never will . . .] because life does not justify living. Eternity does.^{xviii}

Eternity does because we know the God of eternity who even today, sits upon His throne! And we await His summons to come up!

Soon . . . and very soon, we are going to see our King.

Let us close by singing to Him our praise,
Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly hosts;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

ⁱ USA Today (Sept. 25, 2007), p. 1A.

ⁱⁱ Randy Alcorn, Heaven (Tyndale, 2004), p. xix.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} 1001 More Humorous Illustrations (Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), p. 95.

^v Alcorn, p. xx.

^{vi} Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1992), p. 56.

^{vii} Edward Hindson, Revelation (AMG Publishers, p. 2002), p. 56.

^{viii} Renald E. Showers, Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! (Friends of Israel, 1995), p. 195.

^{ix} Ibid., p. 56.

^x Steven Lawson, Heaven Help Us! (Navpress, 1995), p. 19.

^{xi} Ibid., pp. 16-21.

^{xii} Thomas, p. 340.

^{xiii} John MacArthur, Because the Time is Near (Moody Press, 2007), p. 110.

^{xiv} Thomas, p. 342.

^{xv} John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1999), p. 343.

^{xvi} Ray Stedman, God’s Final Word (Discovery House, 1991), p. 115.

^{xvii} Lawson, p. 22.

^{xviii} Mark Buchanan, “Is Life Its Own Reward?” Discipleship Journal (July/Aug., 2003), adapted from Things Unseen (Multnomah, 2002).