

PREFACE

This study has opened our eyes to many new concepts, new interpretations, new facts and revelations. It has certainly broadened our perspective and understanding of the Last Things, as well as challenged a number of our preconceived notions.

I believe that now is an opportune time to interrupt our examination of the third parenthetical visions, found in Revelation 11:15 to 15:8, with a deeper examination of a topic that has arisen over the last few sessions: to wit, *God and the Presence of Evil*.

At the end of Session 31 (10/2/22), I challenged us with the following:

In this and earlier sessions we have learned of Satan's almost constant presence before the throne of God, slandering, falsely accusing the righteous.

Yet this teacher—in this and other classes, especially during our study of the Thessalonian letters—has often expressed the point that the resurrection of believers is necessary to give us glorified bodies suitable for the presence of God, for He cannot abide sinful flesh in His presence. Well, which is it?

One cannot get more sinful than Satan—yet there he is standing before God and His Christ in heaven.

The question for which we need an answer [I posed at the time]: *If God cannot permit sinful, unglorified believers in His presence, how then can He abide Satan and his angels? What are we missing?*

Over the last few months a new understanding has been percolating in my mind, growing bit by bit, pieces added here and there during this study—an understanding that I believe central to this study of the Eschaton, bringing me to the following conclusion: I believe that most of us, perhaps especially those of us born and raised in the church, have been left with a rather narrow perception of God the Father and His heaven. There are subtleties and nuances to Him and His heaven that were not taught us in Sunday School, nor have they been taught much from the pulpit. (I do not mean this as a criticism; it is simply a subject that does not come up that often in the evangelical community.)

The spark that ignited this session's topic was the contemplation of Satan, along with his cohort of evil angels, retaining access to God's heaven even after inciting Adam's fall in the Garden. This means that even now—since some point prior to man's fall in Eden until roughly the middle of the Tribulation (still future to us)—even now Satan, the very essence of evil, retains access to the dwelling of a holy God.

My guess is that most of us have made our peace with a holy God using or working through pagan, even evil men to accomplish His will. All we need do is return to the Exodus narrative to see this in practice.

Read Exodus 7:2-5.

In other words it was God Himself who caused the king of Egypt to reject the signs as insufficient proof to permit Israel to leave Egypt. God's purpose was to *compound* the evidence, increasing the suffering so as to make a more dramatic statement of His power. We might expect a God who so loves Israel ([Deuteronomy 7:6-8](#)) to do everything in His power—which is, of course, limitless—to smooth the way for Israel; we might expect Him to control the Pharaoh's heart in the *other* direction, for him to immediately release them at his first opportunity. But God's agenda is not ours; He *will* be glorified, and He will do it in His own way.

Closer to home for those of us in this study, we see essentially the same thing happening during the Tribulation. God is compounding the misery, working through Satan, Antichrist, and the false prophet—all three evil to the core—to, by contrast, reveal His holiness, and to make it crystal clear that He, the Lord God, will not abide the rejection of His Messiah. One dose of His wrath will not be sufficient, but He will express it again, and again, and again.

Because of these and many more instances in God's word in which He works through unbelievers to accomplish His sovereign will, we are probably at peace with God doing this on earth. But for many of us, it is difficult to swallow the idea that God is employing some of the same tactics within heaven itself. Let's organize our discussion with a series of questions.

IF HEAVEN IS CURRENTLY SUCH A PERFECT PARADISE, WITHOUT SIN, WHY WILL GOD ONE DAY REPLACE IT WITH A NEW HEAVEN ([REVELATION 21:1-4](#))?

Let's consider a few facts about the current heaven and Father God:

- God, omnipotent and omniscient, certainly knew that one of His upper-echelon angels, His beautiful "anointed cherub who covers" ([Ezekiel 28:11-15](#)), would eventually turn against Him, tempt Adam and Eve, and cause the downfall of all mankind in his "very good" Creation. Yet He permitted that to play out.
- Until the middle of the Tribulation, Satan and his evil angels will have access to heaven.
- Anyone who dies prior to the Rapture will be "with the Lord," but will not yet have their glorified, resurrection body.

- In heaven there is indeed weeping and sorrow; for example, “When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also” (Revelation 6:9-11).

- At the Great White Throne judgment ([Revelation 20:11-15](#)) there will be a veritable *sea* of sinners in the presence of God (“standing before the throne”).

My guess is that most of us today think of heaven as a place of sinless perfection and peace, a place of unending, unadulterated joy, a place of purity in which all in attendance worship a holy and righteous God. But that does not describe the current heaven; it describes the *new* heaven, not brought into existence until the very end of the Last Things. Let me read a portion of an answer offered by Dr. Roger Barrier to someone raising the same question we are addressing, who wrote,

Dear Roger,

I’m just confused on one point, where does it say that Satan has open access to Heaven? And there are scriptures that say no sin can dwell in the presence of God, so Heaven isn’t where God is right now?

Sincerely, Seth

Dear Seth,

We hear all the time from people that there is no sin in Heaven! Who says so!? Most people don’t realize that Satan has open access to Heaven even now. We think of Heaven as a place of perfection and peace where there is no more sorrow and no more sin. We are thinking of the permanent Heaven and not the present Heaven. God will one day erect a new Heaven and earth because the present Heaven is soiled with sin.

Unfortunately there is pain and suffering in the present Heaven. For example, in Revelation 6 we see in the present Heaven a group of martyrs who are weeping as they plead for God to wreak vengeance on their persecutors.

God does not remove all the tears from Heaven until Revelation 21 (when He puts the permanent Heaven into place).

We must be careful not to confuse the present Heaven with the permanent Heaven. At the “end time” God will create a new permanent Heaven and a new Earth where there are no longer any tears or sins.

Randy Alcorn, former pastor and currently founder and director of *Eternal Perspective Ministries*, writes,

People usually think of “Heaven” as the place Christians go when they die. A better definition explains that Heaven is God’s central dwelling place, the location of his throne from which he rules the universe.

Many don’t realize that the present pre-resurrection Heaven and future post-resurrection Heaven are located in different places. The exact location of the present Heaven is unknown, but we’re told the future Heaven will be located on the New Earth. The present Heaven is a place of transition between believers’ past lives on Earth and future resurrection lives on the New Earth.

Life in the present Heaven (which theologians call the “intermediate” Heaven) is “better by far” than living here on Earth under the curse (Phil. 1:23). But it’s not our final destination.

Dr. Robert Jeffress, Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, and adjunct professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, writes,

Perhaps the concept of a present Heaven and a future Heaven is a bit confusing to you. Let me illustrate it this way: Let’s say that you have a dream that one day when you retire you will move to the city where all of your children and grandchildren are. When the day of your retirement comes, you buy a piece of land to construct the home of your dreams. While that construction project is going on, you’ve got to have a place to live, so you rent an apartment. It’s nice, and it’s comfortable, but it is not your permanent dwelling place. The same thing is true for Christians when we die. When we die right now, we go into the presence of God. We are aware, we are with our loved ones, but it is a temporary place. God is building a permanent home for us ([John 14:2-3](#)).

DOES THIS SUGGEST A POSSIBLE ADDITIONAL ROLE FOR THE TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS, AND ESPECIALLY THE “FOUR LIVING CREATURES” AROUND THE THRONE ([REVELATION 4:6-11](#))?

What I am about to suggest I do in the spirit of the apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians about marriage. Some counsel he described as coming from the Lord:

But to the married I give instructions, **not I, but the Lord**, that the wife should not leave her husband... (1 Corinthians 7:10)

Other counsel he described as coming *not* from the Lord, but from him:

But to the rest I **say, not the Lord**, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. (1 Corinthians 7:12)

Not only am I not the Lord, I am not an apostle, so what I am about to suggest I offer in the spirit of “for what it is worth,” “food for thought.”

The Lord God is indeed holy. In Leviticus 20:7 He told Israel, “You shall consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am the LORD your God.” Moses also passed along to them that any environment in which “the Lord your God” walks must be holy: “Since the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything indecent among you or He will turn away from you.” (Deuteronomy 23:14) Thus we can safely assume, as Psalm 68:5 states, that where He lives is also holy: “A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, Is God in His holy habitation.”

The prophet Habakkuk seems to echo some of our own questions about a holy God permitting sin and evil—even within His precincts.

Your eyes are too pure to approve evil,
And You can not look on wickedness with favor.
Why do You look with favor
On those who deal treacherously?
Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up
Those more righteous than they? (Habakkuk 1:13)

Yet, as we have discussed, the totality of the current heaven is far from holy and pure, sinless and perfect. How do we reconcile these two?

From a number of passages in God’s word we get a pretty solid picture of the immediate area around the throne of Father God. Let’s compare two of these to see their similarity: the visions of John and Isaiah. [Place a finger at Revelation 4 and a second at Isaiah 6, which is where I would like to begin.](#)

God’s Throne

Isaiah 6:1

In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.

Revelation 4:2

Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne.

The Lord God is *seated* on His throne—that is, the *chair*—yet all descriptions suggest that the throne itself is positioned higher than the surrounding area, which telegraphs importance, seniority, superiority—holiness.

God Himself

Isaiah does not dare to include a description of the One seated on the throne, but John does.

Revelation 4:3

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.

That is, so glorious and holy that all the apostle can do is grasp at similar earthly objects. He then continues with a description of the Presence of God in v5.

Revelation 4:5

Out from the throne come 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;

No wonder Isaiah was so petrified in his vision. He does not describe God's appearance, or even His glory, but he describes the *sound* of omnipotence.

Isaiah 6:4

And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

The prophet Ezekiel offers us further details about "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yahweh." (Note the three layers of separation required to avoid describing God Himself.)

Ezekiel 1:27-28a

Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and there was a radiance around Him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.

The Twenty-four Elders

The passage in Isaiah does not mention the elders, but John does.

Revelation 4:4

Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.

Thus far we have a lofty chair in the center (Ezekiel calls it, "high up") on which Father God is seated. A "sea of glass, like crystal" one gathers is the material constituting the raised dais, or platform for the throne. The twenty-four elders are seated on their own thrones encircling God's throne; theirs are almost certainly on the glass dais, while God's throne is above theirs.

The Four Creatures

John refers to them as "living creatures" (*zoon*; KJV, "beasts"); Isaiah calls them *seraphim*, transliterated from the Hebrew, meaning fiery serpent; Ezekiel refers to them as "living beings" (Hebrew *hay-yah*), essentially the same as the Greek *zoon* in the Revelation.

All three passages mention them, but the prophet Ezekiel gives us the most detailed description of these four creatures. [Please turn to Ezekiel 1.](#) (The only apparent contradictions are that Ezekiel says they had *four* wings, while John and Isaiah say six, and there is some difference in how the creatures' faces are described.)

Ezekiel 1:5-6

Within it there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form. Each of them had four faces and four wings.

The discrepancy between the accounts of their wings may be solved when we compare the appearance of their faces. [Skip down to v10.](#)

Ezekiel 1:10-11

As for the form of their faces, each had the face of a man; all four had the face of a lion on the right and the face of a bull on the left, and all four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each had two touching another being, and two covering their bodies.

The predominant face for each was the "face of a man"; on either side was the face of a lion and a bull (Revelation, "calf"), with the face in the back, opposite the man's, an eagle.

A possible explanation for the discrepancies would be that Ezekiel saw them *moving, but not turning* (vv9, 12). This might explain his fewer numbers of wings. Yet v14 says that "the living beings ran to and fro like bolts of lightning." So even though they never turned, at any given moment one could be in front of the prophet, to either side, or in front of him, thus letting him see that each had four different faces. In contrast, *John never mentions them moving*, which would explain why he describes the faces differently:

Revelation 4:7

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.

If they were facing him each with a different face, and John never saw them move, he would describe them as each having a different face. If their wings were outstretched, he could more easily see them all (six). The setting is different in each of these two accounts: John in the Revelation describes a more static, formal scene of worship, whereas Ezekiel describes a more chaotic scene, with extra elements (e.g., wheels), in which everything seems to be moving and swirling about him.

[Back to Isaiah 6 one last time.](#)

Isaiah's Iniquity and Forgiveness

One last consideration before I draw a conclusion from all this pertinent to God's holiness set against sin in heaven. Look at Isaiah's response to what he is seeing.

Isaiah 6:4-7

And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Then one of the seraphim [creatures or beasts] flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven."

Immediately after this—but *only after his being cleansed of his sin*—the prophet (in his vision) has a one-on-one conversation with the Lord God. That is, *Isaiah could not approach the throne to converse with Father God until his sin had been removed by the seraph.*

Here is my proposition, posed in the form of a question:

COULD IT BE THAT THESE SURROUNDING THE THRONE OF GOD—AND ESPECIALLY THE FOUR LIVING CREATURES—ARE THERE NOT JUST TO WORSHIP GOD, BUT TO SHIELD HIM FROM THE SIN IN THE REST OF HEAVEN?

With good reason most of us have probably come to associate the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures with the perpetual worship of the Lord God and His Christ ([Isaiah 6:3](#); [Revelation 4:8-11, 5:8-14, 15:1-4, 19:1-7](#)).

John MacArthur reminds us, however, that the four creatures serve the Lord in ways far beyond leading in worship.

MacArthur: The four living creatures, like angels in general (Matthew 13:40-43, 49; 25:31ff.; Revelation 15:1, 7), are deeply involved with the coming judgments of the Tribulation, in which they will play an integral role. They will be there at the outset of divine judgments as one of their number calls forth the rider on the white horse (6:1-2). Another will decree economic disaster upon the earth (6:6), while another will give the seven angels involved in the bowl judgments their bowls (15:7).

Thus my proposition for your consideration is that all these "beings," both human and non-human that surround the throne area—including the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures, and at times others—combine to encompass God's holiness. It is *not*, as we might say in human terms, that they create a "safe zone" for God and Christ, as if they are somehow instrumental in creating the holiness and purity of the throne. No, all of that emanates from God Himself; these other figures are there to ensure that no sin or evil gets near enough to corrupt the holy throne area. I imagine the four living creatures to be especially instrumental in this.

This would go a long way toward answering many of our questions regarding the holiness of God, yet the presence of sin in heaven.

- *Is God holy and pure? Absolutely.*

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." (Revelation 4:8)

- *Can God dwell with sin? No.*

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit... For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:1-4, 6-8)

- *Does this mean there is no sin, or will not be any sin, in the present heaven? No.*

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, every 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. (Revelation 20:12-15)

- *Could it be that God yearns for a new heaven and new earth as much as do His people? I believe so.*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)

The bottom line is this: If the present heaven were as perfect and pristine as the future permanent heaven just described, there would be no reason for it to be replaced. God is and has always been utterly and completely holy. It is for this reason He must eventually create a new heavens and earth, so that He can dwell in joy and peace, and perfect holiness, with His beloved people.