

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Seals: When Things Open Up”

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*After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! 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.” At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.*

*Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,*

*“Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.”*

*And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,*

*“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”*

*Revelation 4:1-11*

I’ve been looking forward to this series for a long time. All the way back in early 2020 when we took a quick poll from y’all, one of the top responses was the very book we are starting in today: the Book of Revelation. If you’re new to the Christian faith, or even if you’re not new but just don’t feel all too familiar, the Book of Revelation is the very last book of the Bible, and in the minds of many Christians, even of those who might consider themselves otherwise well-versed in Scripture, Revelation might as well be off the edge of the map, like “Here there be monsters.” Maybe for some of us there’s this vague notion that it’s about the end of the world when all these horrible things happen, but not much more than that. Maybe for others we know there’s lots of weird imagery that we don’t know what to do with. I know Christians who are frightened by this book. I know others who are confused by this book. I even know preachers who just flat out refuse to preach from this book. So you add it all up, and you end up with this mysterious book at the end of the Bible that can feel intimidating.

And that’s a real shame, because as a book, Revelation ultimately should be a book of hope—it just feels so hard to see it sometimes. One writer describes it this way: “The book of Revelation—paradoxically the most veiled text of all the Bible—makes great demands on those who read or hear it in pursuit of the blessing it offers.”

And I think that's right on. It's a demanding book to go into, but there is blessing; there is hope. And in this series, my hope is that by the Spirit's blessing, we might catch a glimpse of it. Let's go to God's Word.

[Read passage.]

Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Imagine with me how you would describe a glimpse into heaven. What might that look like? Then just to yourself, think about what you would write down. What would you say? In popular culture, images of clouds and harps and halos might come up, I don't know; maybe that's not what everybody thinks.

But just from a few short verses, we've got this throne, then someone on the throne who looks like jasper and carnelian, then twenty-four other thrones, then coming from the main throne there's lighting and thunder and flaming torches and something like a sea of glass. Then around that throne, four creatures that at first seem like a lion, an ox, a human, and an eagle, but then they each have six wings and are full of eyes. Anyone get that right?

"After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!" That's how this chapter opens. And it might as well be like in the Wizard of Oz, when Dorothy's house gets taken up the tornado and then lands somewhere else. Up to that point everything had been in black and white, until Dorothy gets up, goes to the door, opens it up, and what does she see? Color. The Land of Oz. Bright, vivid color. And going from black and white into a world of color, it'd be just as jarring as it would be awe-inspiring.

I have to think that's something of what this has to be like: to be gifted a glimpse from this earthly plain, out of the black and white, and into this heavenly place, into vivid color.

This glimpse, this vision, was given to a man named John. He identifies himself at the beginning of the book as a persecuted follower of Jesus. Some say this is the same John who was one of the twelve disciples. Maybe so. Maybe not. He doesn't specify. Just calls himself John and says he's writing from an island called Patmos, off the coast of Turkey.

And what he's writing is meant to convey a vision given by none other than Christ himself in all his heavenly splendor. The first three chapters of Revelation are mostly what this heavenly Christ instructs him to write as letters to seven churches in modern-day Turkey, and those letters could be another series for another day, but then after those letters are done, as chapter four begins, John sees a door standing open into heaven, and a voice saying, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." Then after that, the throne, and the jasper and the carnelian, and the 24 elders, and the thunder and lightning, and the sea of glass, and the four living creatures with six wings and full of eyes.

When we hear all of that, we might be thinking, and for all I know what John was thinking when he wrote it down, "What are we supposed to do with that?"

When I was high school, I did a bit of painting. My school offered some art classes, and nothing I made was going to hang in any museums or anything, but some of my classmates were pretty talented. One in particular developed his own style. I'm sure there's a technical term for it, and I'm sure he didn't completely invent it, but I thought it was cool.

What this classmate would do is take an enormous canvas, as in, bigger than a person. And then on that canvas he would start making short, strong brushstrokes, with each stroke consisting of a bold color. Wasn't a whole lot of nuance or subtlety to these strokes, and you'd end up with a short, strong stroke of bold blue right

next to another short, strong stroke of red, then maybe a short, strong stroke of white, then maybe a short, strong stroke of yellow. And if you were up close to it, you might think, what on earth is going on with this blue dash next to this red dash next to the white next to the yellow? All the more jarring was when you realized the entire canvas was covered like this. Just these bold, strong strokes. These colors don't go together. It's too jarring. You have to mix them. You have to soften the edges. But then if you were to step away, and then step away a bit more, and then step away a bit more, and then looked at the whole painting, you would see that all of those bold, strong strokes of jarring colors actually presented a beautiful, if a bit different, portrait of someone's face.

I think that's something like how we should approach the imagery that John offers here. I think that's he means to offer it. You get up close and look at the colors of the jasper or the sea of glass, and you can analyze each one, and there's truth to unearth there, but focus our gaze too closely on the bold, strong strokes, and we'll just end up wondering, "What on earth is going on?" But if we step back, then step back a bit more, we might see how all those bold, strong strokes that John offers is in fact giving us a beautiful portrait of something hopeful.

I love an image that Pastor Mark offered when he, Rachel, and I were getting ready for this series. He said, Revelation is like standing in a dark room, when suddenly someone opens a door and shine a flashlight in your eyes. Now, describe what you see. If someone's shining a flashlight in your eyes, how precise are you going to be able to be? Not very. Same thing here for John.

You know a word that John loves to use throughout Revelation? "Like." As in, something was "like," or this looked "like." He does that eight times just in this one chapter. Eight times there's something he's trying to describe, but can't quite do it. Just something like something else, and that's the best he can do.

What that means for us, whether it be today or throughout this series or just in any reading we do from the Book of Revelation, is we can get up close, and we can analyze the details of some of this imagery that John has written down for us, but ultimately we have to remember that this is someone in a dark room trying to describe what he sees when a flashlight is shining in his face.

So it means that we could talk about the throne of heaven, with the thunder and the lightning and the sea of glass. We could talk about the one seated on that throne who looking red and orange with jasper and carnelian and what that might mean. We could talk about the twenty-four elders and who they're supposed to be, like the twenty-four clans of priests, or a summation of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles signifying the totality of Israel and the church, the totality of the people of God. We could talk about the four living creatures looking like a lion, an ox, a human, an eagle, but all with six wings and full of eyes and how they may be borrowing and adapting imagery from Isaiah or Ezekiel, or how they signify that sum of all animals, that is, living creatures, surrounding the throne. We can get into the details like that, and sometimes it's good to, and sometimes we need to. And throughout this series if there's ever some aspect that you'd hope to know more about, shoot me a line. Let's talk more.

But if all we talk about are the details of symbolism and imagery, then we may be missing out on the blessing that John offers us in this vision.

It'd be a real shame to get too held up on why there are twenty-four elders and not twenty-five elders, or why there are four living creatures with six wings and not five living creatures with seven wings, all surrounding this heavenly throne. It'd be a real shame because we may not stop to ask, "Well, what are they doing there?"

V. 8 reads, "Day and night without ceasing they sing, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.'" They're worshipping. This first glimpse into heaven, and what do we see, this cosmic

worship service, of the people of God and the sum of creation gathered around the throne. No matter what follows, no matter how troubling or confusing the image, the first thing that John is shown is a glimpse into how things should be and, by the power of the one seated on the throne, how things will be, and that glimpse is one of praise of the one, the only one who is worthy of it.

That's the first thing we see through that door standing open.

What's the first thing you would see if a door stood open into you? That might be just as terrifying for us, right? A window into our soul. This isn't a question about deep, dark secrets or skeletons in closets or stuff like that. We're all broken, sinful people. But if a door stood open, if there was a glimpse into your heart, what's the first thing you would see?

For some of us, maybe things we might consider noble or worthy, like family, or friends, or maybe something more abstract like justice or truth or love. For others of us, maybe something we still might find respectable like our work or our livelihoods, maybe even our church. For still others, if we start getting real honest, the first thing we might see might look quite selfish indeed. Maybe for the past fifteen months when times have been so challenging and different, we thought these parts of ourselves would go away and we'd come out on the other side of the pandemic a different person, a changed person, but not that things have opened up, it's like things have reopened for us too.

The great Reformer John Calvin once offered, "The human heart is an idol factory." How true that is. How easy it is for us to conjure up things that we bow ourselves down to, things that we run to when the going gets tough. Doesn't really make sense because all those things we conjure up are never able to hold up under the crushing weight of hardship, but still we turn to them. Why? Who's to say? But that's just what we'd see if there were a door standing open into us.

And then we have this first glimpse into heaven, a vision of how things should be, or worship around the throne. And what do we see? Among other things, twenty-four elders flinging their crowns before the throne. Whatever authority or status that had been conferred upon them, it meant nothing compared to the worth of what they worshiped, so they cast them away, falling down to sing, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

No matter what you might see if there were a door standing open into you, there's a hope for something better, a life falling before the one who is worthy, who no matter how troubling the times may get, created all things, and who was and is and is to come.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.