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How do you describe the indescribable? That first romantic kiss, how do you put that into words? That scene from the top of the mountain, no photo can ever do it justice, can it? The feelings that were going on inside of you when you reconciled again with your best friend after a massive fight. These things are real but they are really hard to describe, aren't they? For at times, it is hard to explain the unexplainable.

And in Revelation 4 the apostle John tries to explain to us what God looks like? What is currently going on in heaven. And what the eternal interaction between the Creator and the creatures actually looks like. And you can see he is really stumbling for words. And so he reaches for pictures instead. "**Appearance** of jasper and ruby". "A rainbow that shone **like** an emerald encircling the throne." "From the throne **came flashes** of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder."

A picture paints a thousand words, they say. And so today we are going to look at a number of pictures that John uses to explain the unexplainable. And so you and I are not going to get all the details exactly right, we won't have all our questions answered. But hopefully we will go away with this majestic picture that will burn into our brain and ignite a fire in our hearts.

Because one day, all of God's people will see what John saw. And one day they will experience what John experienced. And it is written to us not just to whet our appetite but to help us make the decision that anything we go through in this life will be nothing, nothing compared to what is to come for those who trust in the Lord Jesus.

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Verse 1. 4 *"After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."* An open door. In chapter 3 we saw that Jesus was standing at the door knocking. And before that Jesus had opened the door to the people of Philadelphia. Now we get to see what it is like to actually go through that door. We see what sort of room that Jesus wants to welcome his followers into. And as John steps through that door, you and I can step through it at well. And when we do so we find ourselves in a control room, the heavenly control room, the nervous centre of the entire universe.

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Over the last year or two we have got used to being invited into the control room for the SES or the Bushfire brigades. There is a massive building at Sydney's Olympic Park where those in charge of disaster relief look at their big screens & their monitors. Where experts from all the necessary fields send information to. And the SES Commander or the RFS Commissioner make all their decisions based on up to the minute data.

And in Revelation 4, John gets to go into the control room of the entire universe. And there aren't maps of all the battles going on there or computers or experts in their field. At the very centre of this control room is a throne. A throne. In fact, the word throne is going to be

used 10 times alone at this chapter. And here is its first use.

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### 1. On the Throne (verses 1-3)

<sup>2</sup>“At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me **was a throne** in heaven with someone sitting on it.” At the centre of the universe, in the middle of its nerve centre is a throne and someone is sitting on it. It is not empty. For someone is running the universe. Someone has their hands on the wheel. Someone is in control of everything that is going on. And that someone is not you.

So often we act as if we are the centre of the universe. So often we worry about things as if it all depends upon us. But we are not in control. And the sooner we realise that the better. God is on his throne. Everything revolves around him. Our creator has not just wound up the clock and left it to run by itself. Our heavenly Father created everything in the first place & now he sustains all things. He rules all things. He has unshakable authority over all things.

So, what is this God like? Well how do you explain the unexplainable? John’s only words are pictures or comparisons. <sup>3</sup>“And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald **encircled the throne.**” When John tried to describe God all he could think about was Ruby. No not that Ruby! Ruby the gemstone. That deep red stone. And jasper a clear precious stone.

God is glorious, and precious like a valuable stone. He is beautiful and just one glance of him will take your breath away. God is captivating, breathtaking, in the splendour of His majesty. The best that John has, you see, are analogies, earthly comparisons that inevitably fail to do justice to the reality.

But I find it fascinating, really fascinating that later on in the book, in Revelation chapter 21, when John describes the glorified, perfected Church at the end of the age, the holy city he says, coming down out of heaven from God, like a jasper clear as crystal. So, when we get to heaven, we will be a bit like God. Godly is the word. We will reflect his holiness. The time spent with God will rub off on us. He will forgive us and then over time perfect us. Amazing.

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And then around the throne is a series of circles. Radiating away from God and his throne is a rainbow, and then a series of 24 thrones with elders on them. Then seven lamps a blazing. This rainbow is not just an arc like we might see in the sky, it is a full circle. Reminding us of the story of Noah in the book of Genesis. God sends judgement on the earth but he tempers it with mercy. God’s rule is just but God is a God who loves to also show mercy.

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The rainbow you might remember is a reminder that God has spared Noah from death but it is more than that. It is God’s reminder to himself. Listen to Gen 9:16 for there God says “**I will see it (the rainbow)** & remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.” God doesn’t want to ever forget to show mercy. But not just to human beings for he will show mercy to the earth and everything in it as well.

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So the first part of this indescribable scene is a throne with God at the very centre. And you and I need to go through this open door and see that this is still our reality today. Because you and I so often forget it. We think politicians are in control. Or COVID 19. Or those with

money or good looks. But friends walk through the door that is open with me. God is at the centre of reality. Not me. God doesn't exist to fulfil my agenda. I exist to live for him. My life aim then is to bring God the glory He alone deserves.

Think for a moment about a ship without power or anchor if it on the ocean it is adrift at the control of the wind and waves. And if we don't have God as the power of our lives or Jesus as the anchor of our souls we too are lost and at the mercy of our times and culture. But if God is on the throne of our lives. If he is king then our life is not out of control it is under his good and merciful control. And it means we can live the life that God made us to live.

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## 2. On the throne but what is going on **around the throne?** (verses 4-6)

<sup>4</sup> **Surrounding the throne** were 24 other thrones and seated on them were 24 elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads." So you have the throne and then the circle of the rainbow and then another circle of smaller thrones with 24 people on them. All dressed in white as pure as the snow. Ruling themselves but under the ultimate rule of God Himself.

So who are these 24 elders? Well most likely they represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. Believers from both the OT and the NT who are now ruling with Christ in the heavenly realms. So in a way that could be you and me there for these elders represent the whole Church. And the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2 that *"because of God's great love for us... He raised us up with Christ & seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."*

Christ's death on the cross wins for us salvation, sanctification & glorification as we together rule with Christ. And then <sup>5</sup> *From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.* Being in the presence of God is awesome but it is also scary as well. Over the years when the storms have struck the Taylor household, the main bedroom has become the haven of kids and at times even a dog. Being caught on the road when there is thunder and lightning all around you can become quite terrifying.

And that gives us a picture of what it might be like in the presence of God. This is our God after all. Someone stronger, mightier, grander, holier than I can ever imagine. And yes there is the rainbow, reminding us all of his mercy. But the rainbow first came after the flood, reminding us that God is also a God who will judge the whole world as well. This God is no pushover. Our God is supreme and splendid and terrifying.

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At Mt Sinai when the people of Israel came to the mountain of the law there was thunder and flashes of lightning. And the people had to stay back. But here in heaven, washed from our sins, we have a place right up close and personal with our God. Because before us is a God of grace. In front of us is a throne of grace. And **"In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God"**. The Holy Spirit is still in our midst. Connecting us with God the Father as he has done throughout our earthly lives. <sup>6</sup> **"Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal."**

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The Jews thought that the sea was full of evil and chaos. But before the God who created the seven seas all is calm. Evil is under the control of the King. Chaos is calmed by its creator. God is on His throne and before Him the raging sea is like a lake, still & calm like crystal. And

this is true because our God reigns. He reigns over the sea and the created order, he reigns of the people of this world, he reigns of the sky and the storm. Our God reigns.

Sometimes when we look around our world, we forget that God is reigning. Sometimes we tend to believe that he will reign in the future, but somehow he has lost control of the present. If this is so we need to walk through the open door that is before us tonight. We need to get a glimpse of what is going on in heaven right now. At the moment, God sits on heaven's throne. All authority and power are his and evil is still in His grip. Our God reigns.

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And John is trying to teach us that through this glorious picture. And so the picture of the heavenly throne reminds us of the vision that Ezekiel had in chapter 1. The picture of the rainbow reminds us of the story of Noah and the flood in Genesis 6-9. The picture of the lightning and thunder of Mount Sinai in Exodus. The picture of the lampstands a picture of the Tabernacle from the book of Leviticus. Or in other words, the vision of heaven is best understood when we know the OT Scriptures. For as God opens the door of heaven to us the images we see remind us of God's power, his mercy, his justice & his awesome presence

And this is the God that we worship tonight. This is the God that is at the very centre of our world. So why do we think it is all about me? Why do we have our own agendas and plans and forget about others and forget about God and so go to school, work and uni and not even give God a thought? How crazy is that? God is on throne. Our God reigns & our lives, every second of every day needs to reflect that. But what does that mean in practise?

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### 3. On the throne, around the throne and lastly **before the throne**.

*"In the centre, **before the throne**, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. <sup>7</sup>The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. <sup>8</sup>Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings."*

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Four living creatures. You know you can go to some of the greatest and grandest buildings in the world today and see the statues that they have commissioned of mighty animals at their entrances or go to museums which have dug up sculptures from the grand palaces of yesteryear and they all have great lions or eagles in full flight or dragons and mythical creatures **but none of these creatures are alive**. But in the heavenly throne room there are **four living** creatures with wings and eyes so they can go anywhere and see everything.

And one of them is like a lion, the king of all wild animals. The next one is like an ox, the strongest of all tamed animals. The next one is like an eagle, the most powerful of all the birds in the sky & the fourth has the face of a man, the one created in God's very own image. So each face represents a different aspect of God's created order. And they all help guard & secure the heavenly throne room. They all come under the control of our great God

And interestingly enough when God sends the rainbow and makes his covenant not to destroy the whole world by flood ever again, he makes that promise not just to mankind but also to every bird, all livestock and all the wild animals. You see God's plan in heaven is not just the forgiveness and restoration of mankind. But the restoration of the whole earth. In the new heaven & earth there will be dogs & birds, and lions and lambs. And here in heaven

the animal world is represented. And what are they doing? They are all praising God.

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*“Day and night they never stop saying: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,’ who was, and is, and is to come.”* Day and night they are chirping, growling, barking, chattering God’s praise. You see they also have a relationship with their creator. They are loved by Him. And they show their love for him by praising Him constantly, ceaselessly. These four creatures may look impressive to us but they are more impressed with their God & with his holiness.

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Do you know that the qualifier holy is used of God in the Bible more than any other adjective? Now the WCF the Presbyterian Church doctrinal standard says that *“God is infinite in being & perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts or passions, eternal, immutable, immense, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, **most holy**, most free, most absolute ... most loving, gracious, merciful, long suffering, abundant in goodness & truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression & sin, the reward of them that diligently seek him and most just & terrible in his judgements, hating all sin & who will by no means clear the guilty.”*

And all those things are true. But the first and last songs of the Bible both declare that God is holy. Miriam after the crossing of the Red Sea and the deliverance of Israel, sang: *‘Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you — **majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?**’* (Exod. 15:11). And in Revelation 15 those who had been victorious over the beast sing a similar song: *‘Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to Your name? For **you alone are holy**’* (Rev. 15:4).

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God is holy. Different to us. Perfect in ways. With no sin or evil whatsoever attached to his being. And He is Almighty. He is in control of all things. And he is eternal for he was and is and is to come. And that is what all the creatures in heaven declare. In fact Psalm 150:6 says *“Let **everything that has breathe** praise the Lord, praise the Lord.”* And here we see that is what they are all doing in heaven, even now. But not just the creatures but also the elders.

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<sup>9</sup>*“Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who **sits on the throne** and who lives for ever and ever, <sup>10</sup>the twenty-four elders fall down before him who **sits on the throne** and worship him who lives for ever and ever.”* The people of God also spend their time in worship of their God. They give Him their thanks and praise. Their worship is ceaseless as well. And their worship is filled with words and songs and actions.

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*“They lay their crowns **before the throne** and say:<sup>11</sup> “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”* Notice their words and their actions work perfectly together. Because what is symbolised by the laying down their crowns? Well, they are humbling themselves, aren’t they? They are giving to God the most precious thing they have, their ability to rule on God’s behalf. It is all his & they do it to give him the glory he alone deserves. It is a sign of loyalty. An act of allegiance to their King.

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That is really what worship is all about. We take off our crowns, we give up our pretention to live independently of God, we no longer desire to rule our little world and we say to God all I have is yours. I give back to you all that you have previously give to me.

Today much of our worship is not directed to the creator but to created things. We worship our phones and jump every time they beep at us. We worship our sporting team and follow them with a passion, even at times bowing down before our star player. We worship our jobs and our money and so if we can get some extra cash but miss church well that really doesn't matter. We worship our girlfriends, boyfriend, husband, wife, family and put their needs before our God. But most of all we worship ourselves. Our needs, our wants, our desires. But here the elders cast down their crowns and worship God and Him alone.

As Christians **we are called** to witness to our saviour Jesus, we are called to work out our salvation and we are called to worship Him who is truly first in our lives. And if we aren't witnessing, working and worshipping then it is probably because we have got our eyes fixed on the wrong thing. And so today John is opening up the door to heaven for us. And we are getting a glimpse of God's majesty and awesomeness. He is on the throne, so get off the phone. Worship Him. Sing to Him. Bow down to Him. Cast off your crowns before Him.

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And of course, worship is not just what we do at Church. It is an all of life things. Offer yourselves as living sacrifices, this is your spiritual act of worship. <sup>16</sup> *Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.* <sup>17</sup> **And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.** Whatever you do can be an act of worship. At home, in the car, at work as well as at Church we are called to worship God.

But I believe we can only do that if we can lift our eyes away from our own navels and our own problems and our own world and see the reality that our God reigns, that our God is in control. So let me end with a story from the OT that teaches us just that.

Its from the book of 2 Kings and the King of Aram sent an army to capture the prophet Elisha because Elisha kept revealing Aram's plans in their war against Israel. So Aram sent a whole stack of troops and one day surrounded the city that Elisha was living in. And Elisha's servant one day wakes up and panics, there is no way out for the prophet now. But Elisha prays that his servant might see "That those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And God grants that prayer and Elisha's servant sees that between the force of Aram and the prophet were the (unseen) heavenly armies defending their man.

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In this chapter John is opening our eyes to the unseen world just as Elisha did with his servant. God is on the throne. God is reigning. And all around him the whole of creation is giving him the praise and the worship He deserves.

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So friends lift up your eyes today. Go through that open door. John may be trying to explain the unexplainable but he has painted for us a picture, a powerful picture. And if we can take it to heart. And if we can truly believe it. It might enable us to cast down our crowns and our worries and our concerns and our independence and praise the one who sits on the throne. Our Lord and God. Who was and is and is to come. Amen.