

The Elders in Heaven

Rev. 4, 5: 1-10.

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There is a plain and simple fact which ought to strike any attentive reader of the Revelation: — the churches are no longer in view after Revelation 3 as subsisting and the province of the dealings of the Lord here below. I do not say that they have ceased absolutely to exist; but they are not before the Lord as the objects of His care or even chastening. They are nowhere taken account of after the seer's prophetic visions begin. They are alluded to in the concluding observations of the book, Revelation 22, when the whole course of the prophecy is closed, and the Spirit of God is merely giving, as a final exhortation, the use to be made of the book. But the fact that claims our consideration is, that from the beginning of the fourth chapter we have no longer the churches brought before us as subsisting on earth, and under the disciplinary action of the Lord.

For this reason, as well as for many others of a detailed kind which have acted on the minds of children and servants of God from early days, I have no doubt whatever that the seven churches have a mystic as well as a literal aspect. I believe that the Lord Jesus, in short, chose those seven particular assemblies in the province of Asia, because there were circumstances in them which at that time called for His particular notice. But this is not all. Along with this it was so ordered that His letters to the angels of the churches on their state should be the occasion of giving a prolonged special instruction as long as the church of God was to be the object of His dealing here below. That is, the epistles to the churches had a past historical application in St. John's days; and from that epoch they were intended also to give a kind of prophetic outline of the chief salient points in the course of the church as long as it should be left in this world.

Thus Ephesus shows us the declension from first love which led the Lord to threaten the removal of the candlestick.

In Smyrna we can plainly see persecution from the heathen powers, but along with this the rising up of Judaism formed as a systematic body in the Christian church. It is at this point that we have the "synagogue of Satan" — those who say they are Jews and are not, but a synagogue of Satan. In the days of Paul individuals had been always endeavouring to drag the church of God back into ordinances, or other misuses of the law; but now it was become a compactly framed system — the greatest internal enemy the church of God ever yet had to contend against. Other things there were, some grosser and some subtler. Antichrist, too, had gone out from the family of God; but I am speaking now of that which has often deceived saints. Even as a Barnabas and a Peter (we are informed for our solemn warning) were drawn away at the beginning, so much-more, during the course of the church, godly and orthodox persons have been constantly in danger on this side.

In Pergamos we behold the church where Satan's throne is, not persecuted but exalted, acquiring power and influence under the patronage of the world.

Next we have Thyatira with the portentous figure of Jezebel, that murderous queen and false prophetess, the most relentless slaughterer of the saints of God in all ages. It does not require much of the prophetic ken to understand where the reality that answers to the picture is found. Thus you see it is no longer simply Balaam, or the teaching for hire, but Jezebel, an incomparably more advanced system of evil, and accordingly children born to her. It becomes a perpetuated race of iniquity in that which

bears the name of the assembly of God here below.

After this comes Sardis, where there are no longer horrors of the kind that were contemplated under the preceding; yet, while there is profession of the truth, the Lord tells them that their works were not found perfect before His God. Worldliness, accordingly, is the great snare that is found here. It is not simply the patronage of the world, nor is it only, nor so much, the endeavour to govern the world under the name of the church (this was Jezebel); but now they boast of orthodoxy and correct morals, but, nevertheless, are no better than a name to live with death working largely.

Then we find Philadelphia, which I do not doubt has found its counterpart in the amazing liberty that the Lord has given for the spread of the Bible; in the active going forth of the gospel far and wide; in the recall of Christians, not only to the love of the brotherhood, but to their own proper portion, to which their blessed relationship with the Lord entitles them, and this in the revived prospect of the speedy return of the Lord Jesus.

Lastly there comes Laodicea, a picture of indifferentism, after truth had been largely propagated and known, — but where conscience altogether fails, where the one thought is the people of God and their rights, but alas! without heart for the glory of God. It is merely man under a new form; not man in the world; but man bearing the name of Christ, obliterating in his self-complacency all just thought and feeling for the glory of Christ; — a state accordingly of great boastfulness and pretension, — a state of satisfaction with the progress that has been made, and the largest expectation of that which is to be done. But the Lord counts it all lukewarmness, that indifference which, in His judgment, is more offensive and contrary to His mind than if one were honestly led away by error or evil for a time. It is a heart for nothing; it is lukewarmness to everything, even to Christ Himself. So it is the condition which is above all things loathsome to the Lord, and which He resents; so that He pronounces not merely the removal of the candlestick, but the spueing it out of His mouth, as most nauseous to Him.

Solemn to say, it is here that the curtain drops upon the churches here below. We hear no more about them, save only that in the conclusion, as already said, there is a call to hear the book in general. But as a history under the mysterious protracted form of the seven golden candlesticks and the Lord's messages to their angels — a kind of prophetic history of the church as a whole from that epoch till He comes, "the things that are," — there is nothing more to add.

The scene therein is changed. A door is seen by the prophet opened in heaven, not yet for the Lord Jesus, followed by His saintly hosts, to come out of heaven (which remains for a later date), but for John to go up and see in the Spirit. "After this I looked, and, behold, a door opened in heaven." It is not for drawing near into the holiest by faith: the Spirit of God never calls this the opening of a door. In Hebrews 10 the veil is shown to be rent, and the believer even now by faith draws near through the value of the blood of Christ. But here we have the ordinary figure of that by which one enters in; and accordingly, lest there should be any doubt about the meaning, the first voice which the prophet heard was, as it were, of a trumpet talking with him, and saying, "Come up hither, and I will show thee" — not exactly "things which must be hereafter," as if it were left vague and distantly future, but "the things which must be *after these*." Simple as the change just suggested is — and I apprehend there is no question of the correctness of it; I do not think any unbiassed person familiar with the language would doubt it — the importance of it is this, that it binds what is to follow in the book with the termination of the history of the seven churches. If it meant "hereafter" in a loose general way, you might suppose the seven churches terminated a possibly long interval, and then "things which must be hereafter;" but if we have the seven churches or "things that are," and then "the things which must be *after these*," there is a close link formed between the end of the church's state and the prophetic visions following as

immediately consequent.

Now this will prove of some importance, though I do not wish to press the thought beyond that which would commend itself to any simple and unprejudiced mind. But what man of reflection can avoid seeing that the very next fact brought before us after Rev. 2, 3 is not churches on earth in any shape, but the prophet entering in by the open door in heaven? The immediate object, of course, was for the vision of that which he had to write yet further, the power of the Holy Ghost giving him to behold what was seen in or from heaven and about to be on earth. And what he sees there first of all was a throne set, and One sitting on the throne. It was the throne of God on high. It is not said to be a golden throne, as in the most holy place, whether of the tabernacle or of the temple. Such was the propitiatory seat of gold where blood was sprinkled as a means for men to draw near through sacrifice, priesthood maintaining consistency with it spite of failure. But this is in no way the object of the throne in Rev. 4. The golden throne, with atoning blood upon and before it, is one of grace; it is the expression of what God can be and is to man, where grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord. The throne that was now seen set in heaven was judicial, not the witness of divine grace, though it be always, no doubt, the throne of divine majesty.

"He that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone." The jasper, as we know, is used as symbolic of the glory of God in connection with the heavenly state. In Rev. 21 it is said, "He carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone." I consider therefore that the jasper is used here, and no doubt the sardius also, as symbolic of God's glory, as far as it could be manifested to the creature. There is a glory of God that is entirely above creature contemplation; there is a glory which may become visible to the creature. God has at various times permitted that His glory should shine on men, even on earth; but more so when rapt in the Holy Ghost, into His presence above. At the same time, I say again, it is not, of course, the essential glory of God "to which no man can approach," but as far as God is pleased to make it visible to the creature. It is His glory in government, in the maintenance of good against evil by power.

Round about the throne was seen a rainbow, the sign of God's beneficence to the earth, and at the same time the pledge of a limit put to judgment; but it is not as ordinarily seen among men. (Gen. 9) It recalled that covenant with the earth; but there is no question of rain here, as even in Ezekiel 1: 28. It is simply the divine idea. It is not the circumstances of its use or application, but the grand truth that was represented there — the faithful sign of God's covenant with the creature. Hence it was shown in a form which was particularly refreshing to the eye; it was "in sight like unto an emerald."

"And round about the throne were four and twenty — not merely seats, but — "thrones." Every throne is a seat, but every seat is not a throne. These were not bare seats, but thrones for those on whom royalty was conferred. It was, no doubt, a heavenly kind of royalty; but still the thrones were for certain to fill.

This is a remarkable feature. We never hear of angels seated on thrones. Angels never govern; they were made not to reign but to be servants. They never rise above the character of service. Man was made to rule, though, of course, in subjection to God. Even the first man was made to govern. When God made him He said, "Let them have dominion." It was not merely to do His will. As servants, all are necessarily bound to do the will of God; and all the blessedness of dominion, as of everything else also, depends on its being the will of God. No man governs aright that will not serve. No man will reign righteously that has not a just view of what obedience is to one that is above him. How can he

possibly impress the necessity of subjection upon those that are below him? But then, when God made the first man, he was not looking merely at Adam, or the race: the Second Man, the last Adam, was before His mind. Other men were not worth counting. One man, the first man, was enough to comprehend all the Adam race. That one brought, oh! what ruin upon all that followed him. And God passes quickly from the ruin, and hastens to the day when the Second Man appears, the Lord from heaven; and that man is the last Adam. There is no improvement upon Him; there is no progress after Him. The Second Man is the last Adam; and He is the one that is to govern — the destined Ruler of all, God alone excepted. For you must remember we speak here of His reign as man; and a wonderful thought it is, that every creature of God will be put under the God-exalted man — the man that never exalted Himself, the man who first showed His special and wondrous glory, not by the great deeds He did, but in obedience. Others might do exploits. His servants were to do greater works than He did. But there was one thing in which no servant approached Him — the last thing that you might expect in a divine person; but in a divine person who was a man obedience was the moral perfection of the place He took. Such is the one for whom the kingdom is reserved. He justly takes the throne. He is set, according to God's glory, over all the works of His hands; not, I repeat, simply as God, though He was God from all eternity, and never could cease to be. But He acquired, as man, universal dominion; and He acquired it, not simply by doing the will of God: had He taken it on the ground of what He did, He had taken it alone. He alone deserved it — but He took it, as we shall find, on a far deeper and infinitely more blessed ground — the ground of redemption; and thus others are associated with Him. For that redemption was not for Himself, but for us; and it is on this footing alone that He could have the children of God associated with Him, by redemption, in that glorious kingdom for which He waits, and for which we ought to be waiting.

Here, accordingly, we find round the throne of God twenty-four thrones. What is the allusion in the number "twenty-four"? Numbers in scripture are never without meaning. Do not listen to the men that tell you it merely means a greater or a smaller number, that it is merely a sort of poetic figure. Why even you do not use language so capriciously as that! When you say twenty-four, you do not mean a mere random number, though you are certainly far from the deep wisdom of God in its symbolic use. But if you are a sensible man, you have some sensible idea. Certainly God will never be below man in the expression of His mind. Now, "twenty-four" is used in scripture; and, as far as I know, the only point with which we can compare our number was when the king divided the priests into so many courses, of which courses there were chief priests. I do not merely mean the high priest: there was but one in such a position. As there was only one among the earthly people, so there is only one for the heavenly. But here we are speaking of the creature, and it is notorious that there were chiefs of each course of priesthood; and as there were twenty-four courses of priests, so also with the singers. It was connected therefore, you will observe, with the ordering and arranging of the priestly service of God. Now this, I have no doubt, is the allusion here.

These twenty-four thrones were not empty. "Upon the thrones I saw four and twenty elders sitting" What is the idea conveyed by the term, "elders"? Clearly the possession of wisdom — in this case, of course, heavenly wisdom. The elders were seen round God's throne, sitting on thrones, "clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold." This is another point which separates them, but at the same time assuredly confirms what has been already remarked of their separation from angels — from the highest beings of a spiritual sort suited to heaven — the only inhabitants indigenous to heaven, if one may so say.

The elders had never been seen there before. Visions of heaven have past before us in the Old Testament: why were no elders seen then? Why was there no such group of surrounding thrones? The

apostle Paul was caught up to heaven, but not a word about elders in heaven then: why now? Surely there were the spirits of the blest in heaven; but spirits are never said to be enthroned; spirits are nowhere in Scripture described as glorified. They are with Christ; they are in paradise; but they are never spoken of as already crowned. The crown is always represented as a future glory. Why so? Because God does not mean to bring any of His people into the full result of heavenly blessedness until He brings them all in. The same moment is destined for the heavenly gathering together of all saints changed into the likeness of Christ. It matters not at what time they lived or died, or if they survived till He comes. I speak, of course, now, of heavenly saints — of those that are to be above. I do not at all exclude the fact that God afterwards begins to form a people upon earth; but I say that those who are destined for the same common heavenly blessedness are caught up together, and that the point of time when they are caught up — the turning-point on which their translation to heaven depends — is the presence of the Lord Jesus for them.

Proofs abound. "We beseech you, brethren, by the presence (or coming) of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto him." Any scholar knows that the presence of our Lord Jesus, and the gathering together of the saints to Him, are here represented in a remarkable manner as one combined idea. There is only one article, which therefore acts as a kind of bracket, and binds together the two thoughts. That is to say, the gathering of the saints is not before the presence of the Lord, nor is it left for a separate act after He comes to meet them. The force is, that the presence of the Lord at once gathers all the saints: whether the dead, by raising them; or the living, by changing them into His glorious likeness.

The result is apparent now. Here they are seen on high. Here they are found in the presence of God in heaven; and they are there enthroned, and crowned with "crowns of gold." They had practically manifested righteousness; but divine righteousness alone had brought them there and thus dealt with them. It is not that they lacked the witness of righteousness in their ways and daily conversation on earth, or that they were without the answer to it now in heaven; for they are seen also to be clothed in white raiment — a full acknowledgment of saintly righteousness, as the gold is of God's righteousness. The moment you get righteousnesses, you get differences among the children of God. It is known afterwards, from Rev. 19, where the white linen is explained to be the righteousnesses of saints. That is, each has a righteousness which divine grace has produced in them and by them, and this is recognised above. It is a falsehood that God does not own that which His Spirit has produced here; but it is a still more dishonouring and destructive falsehood to suppose that the righteousness of the saints could bring any to God. The only righteousness that could fit a sinner before Him in heaven is the righteousness of God, founded on the Lord Jesus and His infinite redemption. But then, although grace works through righteousness in the redemption that is by Christ Jesus, full room is left for whatever the Spirit of God may have wrought in and by the children of God. Thus all truth is kept unimpaired. The people that deny the righteousness of the saints are wrong; and the people that deny the righteousness of God are still more fatally wrong. The fact is, that you will find in this, as in all other controversies about scripture, that there is a great deal of truth apt to be sometimes forgotten on both sides. I am alluding, not to anything particular of late years, but to the invariable course of controversies — no matter what the occasion may have been — in Christendom.

In this case then the twenty-four elders on thrones are for the first time seen in the presence of God. Scripture emphatically marks this. Indeed it is clearly the grand distinctive feature that caught the eye of the prophet, next to the throne of God Himself. There were thrones - associated and subordinate — no doubt; but still there were thrones around the great central throne of God; and those seated on them embrace in the most distinct manner the heads of the heavenly priesthood. I say the *heads* for this

reason; that after these saints are shown us as elders crowned and enthroned in heaven, we find the clearest reference to others that were about to be kings and priests. That is, we find certain persons who suffer and are glorified after this. The very last words that I read today show another body of saints. It is said there, "Worthy art thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed [us] to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made them unto our God kings and priests; and they shall reign," etc. This is the critical reading. I have bracketed a disputed word, and changed where there is no doubt. And where, let me ask, is the reverence of cleaving to a reading that is undoubtedly an innovation? I hold, with due consideration of the context, to more ancient authorities. Who will deny that the nearer you get to the source, the better the reading as a rule? Of old as now many mistakes were made in copying. The scribes that followed the apostles were not inspired any more than printers or editors in modern times. We have therefore to examine everything; and the only sound principle in these matters is to look at all the evidence, and thence to form the result.

Now, I am of opinion that both external and internal evidence would lead a competent judge to the conclusion that the word "us" should be absent from the ninth verse. It would seem probable that copyists inserted ἡμῶς ("us") there — not that this is at all necessary or peculiar to any views I hold.* The most competent enquirers who have no settled interpretation of the book or schemes opposed to mine, agree in omitting it. Thus the most famous editor of the day holds it — the Lutheran Tischendorf. Another excellent scholar, who was when living rather more of a rationalist, holds the same thing — I allude to Lachmann. Again, Dean Alford, of this country, and many more, accept the same reading, agreeing as far as this is concerned. I refer to these various well-known names openly, that none may allow the groundless thought that there is anything peculiar or individual in this judgment. These matters are the common heritage of the church of God; they rest on facts that cannot be gainsaid by anybody except the ignorant.

* Some years since Professor Tischendorf reported to me, among other Apocalyptic readings, that the Sinai MS. omitted the pronoun ἡμῶς in Rev. 5: 9. This I printed on his authority, which was followed by Dean Alford and others. But when the great uncial was published, I immediately perceived either that the printed text was here wrong, or that the discoverer had led me into an error, awkward to many more though to none so painfully as to me. But he had the candour immediately to re-examine the MS. on my appeal to him, and to confess frankly that he had misled me. Very different was the feeling of a scholar in this country from whom better things might have been expected. *He* had the temerity not alone to charge me with the fault but to mix up with it the doctrine of the rapture of the church, as if this had influenced the erroneous report. The truth is, that the weighty evidence lies in the fact that, according to the best authorities followed even by my censor himself, it should be "them" and "they" in verse 10 (as required by the true Greek text). The elders and living creatures are praising the Lamb in that verse *for others* made kings and priests, not for themselves. This is incontestable. The point debated is whether ἡμῶς should or should not be read in the preceding. Even if it ought certainly to be read, it would rather strengthen the distinction between the saints represented by the elders and living creatures. But I was willing to waive what would rather fortify my position, as honestly believing with the best critics that it is a most suspicious reading, if not certainly on external evidence an intruder. And I was convinced, as I am still, that its insertion presents a sense (when the two verses are taken together) so strange that nobody has yet offered a tolerable explanation. It is therefore still more objectionable on internal grounds. But the question is really independent of doctrine, and is much more one of critical acumen and of spiritual judgment.

There is another point far clearer, and, it may be boldly said, indisputable. Any one who knows

anything about the sacred text must be aware that in verse 10 "them" and "they" should take the place of "us" and "we." I do not deny that this is a considerable change of sense; but the evidence is so overwhelming that no one who respects the witnesses God's providence has preserved can hesitate. The sense resulting is excellent, save in the retaining of "us" in the verse before, which would present a harsh and unprecedented change of persons, which nobody, as far as I know, pretends to understand or account for. Here, therefore, one ought to speak with still greater assurance than as to verse 9; though I believe that the change required in verse 10 makes verse 9 uncorrected to be hardly intelligible, and adds much internal force to the few witnesses for its correction. The tenth verse would run thus: "And made them to our God kings and priests: and they shall reign over the earth." A distinct party is in question from those who are singing. The elders, and I suppose also the living creatures, are singing of others. They celebrate the worthiness of the Lamb that was slain and brought to God by His blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation, etc. Whether the word "us" should or should not be in verse 9 is not the point on which we are now reasoning. Certainly there is no room for doubt as to the tenth verse — "and made *them*," not "us" — unquestionably not "us." The Lamb "made them [that is, some others previously described or at least alluded to] unto our God kings and priests: and they shall reign over the earth."

The importance of this, the true text, is very great, because it shows that besides the twenty-four elders who have this glorious and heavenly place as chiefs of heavenly priesthood, there are others bought by His blood who, although not in the place of such exalted dignity, either now or at any later time put among the twenty-four elders, are celebrated as made kings and priests, and shall reign over the earth. Thus they are not only to be spared during the judgments that follow, but they are even to share as royal priests in the great millennial kingdom of our Lord Jesus. Nothing can be simpler and surer than this, which is conclusively established by Rev. 20: 4, where the sitters on the thrones are the first class, corresponding to the elders (i. e. the Bride, and those called to the marriage supper); then the early sufferers during the seals (after the elders were seen in heaven); and, thirdly, the latest sufferers under the beast in the last efforts of the Antichrist. All share the millennial reign with Christ. The assumption, therefore, that the only persons who will be found in heaven and reign with Christ are these chiefs of heavenly priesthood, is an evident mistake. Saints in a somewhat different position otherwise are to reign with Christ as well as the elders. The twenty-four, when they are seen in heaven, sing of the grace that the Lord was showing, not to themselves, but to others, and this not merely in making them blessed under His reign on the earth, but with Him and them to reign over it.

By the way it may be just observed that the rendering to "reign on the earth" is also erroneous. When the verb "to reign" is put along with the preposition ἐπὶ, it invariably means the *sphere* of the reigning and not the place where those who reign dwell. There is another word (ἐν) that is used invariably for the latter idea.

Scripture is really the most exact book in the world, it matters not what author you select for a comparison with it. If you take the finest effort of Attic Greek, it will be found that there is an accuracy about Biblical language, when people once get into its spirit and understand it, which is beyond Plato, Sophocles, Thucydides, Demosthenes, or any other master of that refined and versatile tongue. Do you allege the solecisms of New Testament Greek? They are far less numerous than pettifoggery, combined with ignorance of the truth, used to affirm. But let me tell you that even those authors are not free from words, turns of phrase, and constructions which offend against rule, not only bold rhetorical terms, but structures of sentence that will not bear strict analysis. For instance, it is a fact, although it may seem somewhat odd to many, that the most celebrated of the classics not infrequently make bad grammar in the best of their few extant compositions. It is not insinuated that they did not know it was unusual;

they wrote as they did because it added energy to the style. It is only dull men who occupy themselves in fiddling about grammar, and think that there must be always an adherence to technical rules of common language and every-day speech; but the best writers defy such conventionalities whenever it is necessary to give emphasis to what they wish to communicate.

It is not otherwise in the word of God. There is no doubt in scripture, as elsewhere, an occasional departure from the strict rules of ordinary syntax. Let nobody by this suppose my meaning is that it is of no importance to know how to use human speech — our own as well as the language that God used especially, or any other tongue we may be acquainted with. But it needs to be borne in mind, at the same time, that there is for the Spirit an energy of truth, as well as rhetorical skill among men, which does not hesitate to set at nought a mere grammatical point for some higher end. This falls in with what is claimed for the word of God — the most perfect form of revealing to men that which God would convey to him. Hence it is, that what some are quick to count blots or blemishes of style are all sanctioned and intended by God's Spirit; and that what sounds at first abrupt, harsh, or strange, spite of that peculiarity whatever it may be, conveys the idea more justly than anything else could. Yet, claiming all this for the word of God and for every line of it, we must not go beyond our text, but hold that the writers only used what can be proved by the best evidence of every kind, external as well as internal, to be the very words of the Holy Ghost.

In this case, then, we have the four and twenty elders round the throne, and besides, as already said, the intimation in the next chapter that others from all quarters are not only to be saved but to reign with Christ over the earth as well as themselves. This is of the highest interest. It shows us plainly that we must not adhere to those systems of doctrine that never can bear an infringement of a view that is held popularly. For instance, perhaps we have all been brought up in the notion that all the children of God, in all ages, compose the church of God. Now it will be found on closer research that this is not supported by the word of God. While fully granting the pre-eminent place in glory to the church, scripture shows there are others to be blessed in heaven as well as on earth who are not included in that particular company. And this is proved, not only by the prophetic word, such as this, but by the plainest doctrinal teaching of God. Take for instance Heb. 12, or again Heb. 11. In the end of the latter chapter we are told that God had "provided some better thing for us, that they [the Old Testament saints] without us should not be made perfect." Here you have clearly a distinction between *them* and us, as those who sing differ from those sung of in Rev. 5. The nature of that distinction is another matter. We may be more or less exact in our appreciation of the difference, but differences there are, past, present, and future, expressly laid down by the word of God. Take again the next chapter, where it is said that we "are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem;" and more than this, "an innumerable company of angels;" then "God the judge of all;" then the church of the firstborn." It is impossible fairly to overlook a distinction here drawn (to speak of no more) between "the spirits of the just made perfect" and "the church of the firstborn." You have clearly the assembly of the heirs or firstborn — who are viewed elsewhere as the one body; and you have the spirits of just men made perfect — another company quite distinct. This is enough to show that the word of God does distinguish where a great many excellent people confuse.

I do not pretend to go into all at once, but I am bound to produce from elsewhere support and illustration of that which is before me in the chapters we are now considering. Let it suffice to say then that the twenty-four elders are beyond doubt in a singular and conspicuous place of blessedness — saints glorified in the presence of God. Yet it is clear that, when there, they anticipate others who are to reign with Christ as well as they. These others are so much the more important, because the great object of the book of the Apocalypse is to show us the destiny, and the circumstances through which they pass

in order to arrive at that destiny, of these other saints.

Let us, however, go on with our chapter. "Out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices." To this I call your particular attention. Is this the aspect of God's throne as now revealed and known? Do thunderings and lightnings and voices proceed from the throne of God at this present time? And is this the way in which the throne of God — the action of His throne — is or would be qualified? Certainly not. The throne of God now is a throne of grace, to which we come boldly. (Heb. 4) Impossible for man here below to come boldly to a throne out of which proceed thunderings and lightnings and voices. This would indeed be presumption; for we must then defy, as it were, that which the throne itself manifests and proclaims. Clearly the thunderings and lightnings and voices are the expression of God's displeasure and judicial feeling, so to speak, towards things and people upon the earth.

Is it demanded, then, how the elders come to be seen around such a throne? For this simple reason — they are in the resurrection state; they are in heaven glorified. How did they get there? They were gathered to the presence of the Lord who entitled them to stand there. How is it, then — and this is a very fair question — that the presence of the Lord which is to gather His heavenly ones to Himself is not here described? My answer is, as it is set forth nowhere in the Revelation (if so, where?), the objection is entirely invalid. It is not the fact that it can be shown to be described elsewhere. In short, you must insert it in some place where it is rather implied than described. The only question is, where is the best place to suppose it? I answer, here assuredly, and nowhere else; and here for this reason — that you have the chiefs of the whole body, and remember, not twelve, not twenty, not twenty-one, but twenty-four. They are the heads of the entire priesthood — the whole of the glorified or heavenly priesthood viewed in its chiefs; and in its chiefs, because there are others to be priests afterwards. Therefore you could not have more than the chiefs seen here. If they are gathered to be with the Lord in heaven, not in spirit, but in body also — glorified there if they are crowned and enthroned there, all this cannot be without the Lord having come and gathered them unto Himself. If so — how? How possibly conceive such a thing as the full number? Bear in mind that there is no addition to those thrones afterwards, not even one more; never but twenty-four thrones — never more or less than twenty-four elders. If it were merely the estate of separate spirits, there would be afterwards an addition. Room must be left for more at a later epoch. But no; the same unvarying body is found until a certain defined moment, when this symbol of elders disappears and gives way to another — when the time is come for what is called the bridal or the-marriage supper of the Lamb.

At that time of joy it is no question of elders: the Lamb does not marry people as elders, but as the bride. It is the very same body, but viewed no longer as invested with the wisdom that God conferred through our Lord Jesus; no longer viewed, in short, as elders, but as one corporate company, the bride. This is in relation to the marriage just then celebrated, which is the consummation of the hopes of the church. It is the full expression of our communion with Christ.

Then, again, when the Lord Jesus is about to execute judgment on the beast, and the false prophet, and the armies of the earth, He takes the place of a warrior, and so do they. They are at that point seen not as elders, of course, nor even as the bride; for what business has either in battle? They are seen in what is far more admirably suited to the case: they come out of heaven as, the hosts on white horses, like the great Leader they follow.

Thus, it is readily seen, we have very clearly symbolic language used with the greatest possible precision in the Revelation. Of course I admit there are difficulties in this book, as there are in every other; but the man who talks about the difficulties of the Revelation I should like to see taking-up

Genesis. Very likely he imagines he understands the first book of Moses well; but it can easily be proved that understanding one part of the word of God generally goes with understanding another, and the people that do not profess to understand the end of the Bible, you may depend upon it, do not know much better about the beginning: at least, such has been my experience in these matters. The word of God gives us the truth; and one part of revelation makes way for another. It is a living organism. It is not a mere science that you may master up to a certain point, and not understand the rest; it is a thing of life and power. These words are spirit and life, as given by the Spirit of God; and although undoubtedly there may occasionally be one that has been blessed in directing his attention to a particular part, it is the exception rather than the rule. In general, the man that understands the Bible best is the man that reads it *all*, valuing it as given of God to be understood by the Holy Ghost; consequently, he does not pretend to have fathomed or exhausted any part, but he, by grace, understands a little here and a little there, and so on, right through the whole Bible. This is generally true of Christians who have faith in the word and Spirit of God; and I believe it the safest and wisest way. It is a dangerous thing to have your hobbies in scripture — your favourite subjects, which exclusively occupy your mind. Those who so read get exaggerated, unhealthy notions by that means. I would urge my brethren to seek earnestly a real and large entrance into the mind of God. In order that it should be deep, be assured that this depends to an immense extent on the measure in which self is judged, and the Lord is looked to; for you cannot separate intelligence in the things of God from spiritual state. It is not genuine, wholesome, or savoury, without moral power; and it is a great mercy that so it is.

As far as concerns the subject before us, the general result seems to me to be sufficiently plain — plain enough to the simple; and the main point is to become simple, in order that we may really enter into the revealed mind of God.

Returning to our chapter, we may remark that beside the issuing from the throne of lightnings and thunderings and voices, we find "seven lamps [or torches] of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God." It means the Spirit of God. He is not now described as baptizing into one body. Such is the way in which God acts in the church. But here it is in the retributive dealings of God. It is that Spirit which perfectly discerns, detects, and judges — seven torches therefore — that which does not fail to make manifest morally before itself. God will act to this end when His throne assumes a judicial character. The evidence is abundant that it is a different state of things from what exists now. This confirms therefore what has been said before. The churches are done with. There is no such thing as the Lord dealing with Christian assemblies on earth He is no longer in that form of relationship when the fourth chapter begins to apply.

But, further, "before the throne was a sea of glass like unto crystal." Now, in the temple there was a sea, no doubt, but it was a sea of water, not of glass (as in the tabernacle there had been a laver). Here then we have a sea, but it is a sea of glass. Why so? As long as there was one member of the body of Christ who required to be cleansed in passing through this defiled and defiling earth, so long the figure of the application of the water by the word is necessary. Why is it here a sea "of glass"? Because it is no longer a question of the word used to cleanse the defiled. Their course was over. They had passed out of the scene of defilement. Those who are here viewed in the presence of God are no longer subjects of defilement. As long as they were in the world, of course they needed to have their feet washed. He who says that, because one is washed in the blood of Christ, he does not require to confess his sins day by day, understands no more than half his Saviour, and evidently sets one part of God's mercy and blessing against another. It would be most miserable, if it were otherwise possible, with new and eternal life, to be left under the consequences of daily defilement. It is granted that if all you care

for is just that your sins should be forgiven, you may have a scanty sense of God's holiness, or of what becomes His child; but if you feel the value of communion with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, if you prize the blessedness of sharing the Lord's thoughts and feelings, you cannot but be sensitive to such defilement which grieves the Holy Ghost whereby you are sealed till the day of redemption. This is precisely why God works in you by His Spirit. He sees and feels what is wrong; He acts according to God's nature as displayed in Christ, and brings you to feel evil and to confess it before Him. Such is the effect of Christ's priesthood. We require not only a Saviour to die for our sins, but a priest to live for us, and to intercede for us though we are Christians, because we are still on earth in weakness, need, and alas! too often failure. Accordingly, it is not denying His sacrifice that will mend matters, nor will nullifying His priesthood establish souls, but simply dry them up into mummies.

The blood of Christ remains the one sacrifice; and it is of the very essence of the truth of Christianity that there is but one sacrifice, and that Christ's sacrifice has done this work perfectly and for ever for the believer. But then, instead of a man merely looking back at the sacrifice of Christ, when he falls into a sin, he has, while holding this fast, to humble himself before God; for the Holy Ghost uses the word of God to deal with him founded on the sacrifice of Christ, but never renewing it. The sacrifice of Christ abides in its efficacy; but, so far from this being all we want, because of it there is a necessity for "the washing of water by the word." "He that is washed [bathed] needeth not save to wash his feet." For this is he that "came by water and blood, not by water only, but by water and blood." The Lord Jesus has provided for all. Out of His side, as we know, flowed both; and so it is, that as the blood of Christ expiated our sin as guilty sinners before God, so the water not only gives us new birth, but also, in answer to His own intercession, carries on the cleansing of the feet when they are defiled in our own passage through the world.

This is no longer the case with those connected with the sea of glass; that is, it is no longer the want when saints are glorified; and so this vision intimates. Not, of course, that the Lord will neglect any of His people who may afterwards be called. The vision to which we are here introduced simply gives us a complete picture of the change that will have taken place when it is fulfilled; and one of the new elements we see is that, instead of a laver of water to wash the feet of those exposed to the soils of earth, the saints are now seen in glory — elders in His presence, assessors on thrones round God's throne. The whole work was done, not of atonement only but intercession also, as far as they were concerned. As they had thus passed out of the sphere where they needed the cleansing operation of the Spirit, the symbolic sea in this vision consists not of water but glass. It is fixed, not active, purity. It is the witness therefore that no defilement remains. As they had passed out of earth, and sit enthroned in the presence of God in heaven, we can readily understand that it could not be otherwise.

There is a subsequent vision, affording an interesting point of contact, or rather contrast, that may be called to your attention. As is easy to be seen, there are others who are called by God's grace after these; but they go through a storm of suffering; they go through a sea of awful temptation, tribulation, and everything else that can harass mind and body. And this will fall, I have no doubt whatever, as a scourge on the guilty world — God's retributive dealing, because of the despising of the gospel, as well as the unfelt unjudged rejection up to death of His own Son. You know that Jews and Gentiles both put to death the Son of God. Certainly the disciples did not. Afterwards they acquired a heavenly character, and, by Paul's ministry, pass out of the earthly scene. Christians as such were not guilty of Christ's death. Whatever was their guilt, it was atoned for by that precious blood; but they were not called as yet, and so not guilty of the dreadful deed. Jews and Gentiles were.

Accordingly, it needs no great intelligence to see thoroughly the moral reasons why the church,

being called out after the cross, should be now taken out of the scene, and why the Lord begins to work on Jews and Gentiles. They go through this retributive chastening; they are the direct proper objects of this special tribulation; and when at the close some of them are seen as conquerors — for the Lord will surely work by grace in a certain number — when those who had won the victory over the beast, etc., are seen in Revelation 15, they are found on "a sea of glass, mingled with fire." There is no mingling with fire in Rev. 4. The fire is the heat of tribulation; and when the saints that pass through the tribulation — those that died, and were brought by grace into heavenly glory — when they are seen at a subsequent epoch, they have on them the marks of having crossed that sea, the tribulation through which they passed. It is not so with the elders. The reason is, that the tribulation was not even heard of yet. The tribulation, the great tribulation, was long after they were gone to heaven.

On the whole, therefore, the general bearing of the chapter is not so obscure as to hinder the simplest mind in Christendom that is subject to God through the teaching of the Spirit from understanding it.

"Before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four" (not "beasts," as is well known, but) "living creatures." These living creatures show us the various qualities of God's power; they represent it in a symbolic form. The heathen, as we know, who did not know God, exalted the attributes of God into idols which they worshipped. Here we know not merely the living creatures that are round about the throne, but Him that sat upon it; we know the one and only true God the Father, and we know Him by the Lord Jesus whom He has sent. But God does in this symbolic way teach the characters of His power in which His judgments are going to be executed.

First, we may observe the four living creatures were full of eyes before and behind. It is remarkable that, although we have the cherubim described in the Old Testament, they are not so spoken of there. They are here described as having not only eyes, but eyes within, as stated in verse 8. This is peculiar. They may have eyes, but "eyes within" seems to show an intrinsic power of discernment that is characteristic of the New Testament. Thus all the description here, while it resembles the Old Testament, gives us progress and so far difference. In short, the living creatures are somewhat like the cherubim, and in other respects like the seraphs of Isaiah vi. Besides, they have their own peculiarities, resembling the cherubs of Ezekiel. The first is like a lion, the second like a steer or young bull, the third living creature had a face as a man, and the fourth was like a flying eagle. That is, you have power in its majesty, power in its patient labour and endurance, intelligent thought in that which was like a man, and rapidity of execution shown forth in the flying eagle. Again, these four living creatures had each of them six wings about him, just as the seraphs had in Isaiah; and they had not the wheels, a point that distinguishes them from the vision of Ezekiel. "And they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come."

It is worth while to pause a moment and look at the great moral principles of what we have here. There are two relative qualities in reference to which may be traced a remarkable difference in the elders — I mean righteousness and holiness.

Now what is the effect of the direct presence of God on the saints themselves displayed in righteousness before Him? Revelation 4 shows more than this, the exercise of His throne being judicial dealing with the earth. There are lightnings and thunderings and voices. But the remarkable feature disclosed is, that whilst the elders are enthroned before God thus revealed in righteousness, they sit peacefully in His presence. There is not the very smallest symptom of alarm. There is not even a movement discernible, so truly are they made God's righteousness in Christ.

On the other hand, when God in His holiness is celebrated by the four living creatures according to His own nature — when they praise Him as the "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty," the elders are at once in movement. Thus before judicial dealings the elders show us the most perfect rest in the presence of God. As a question of judgment there is not one demand of righteousness that was not satisfied by the cross. If there had been any sin unremoved, oh, what trouble had been among all the twenty- four ! But no; they sit in perfect peace on their thrones. But when His holiness is in question, they fall down before Him; they do homage to Him that lives to the ages of ages; they cast their crowns before the throne. Their hearts are swallowed up in the delight of what God is. What He is in His holiness draws them out. It is the attractive power of His holiness, not the (to others) alarming power of the righteous judgments of God, which kindles their spirits and engages them in adoration. In the presence of righteousness there is nothing but rest; in the presence of the celebration of His holiness there is activity of worship.

Such is, then, the scene that is presented in Revelation 4. I shall say a very few words on Revelation 5 before I close.

Hitherto we have simply had the Lord God Almighty — Jehovah Elohim — that was, and is, and is to come; God, as He had made Himself manifest in His dealings with men here below, especially with the fathers and Israel, but now seen on the throne. And why so? How comes it that He is not here presented as the Father? You know very well how constant in the New Testament "the Father" is. It is notorious that we never hear such a thing as grace and peace from the Lord God Almighty — from Jehovah Elohim, or any other Old Testament designation. And when the apostle Paul employs this his customary formula, never does he couple it with Shaddai Jehovah, or Elohim. The same is true of the apostles John and Peter and Jude. Nor does even James, though Israel is addressed, and there are texts throughout relative to Jehovah; but never does he give a salutation from Jehovah as such. Why is the old style and title found here? Because a change of great moment is come in; because God is no longer revealing Himself in the formation of the heavenly family. He has taken them out of the scene, which can only be by the coming of the Lord Jesus personally to receive them. (John 14; 1 Thess. 4; 2 Thess. 2: 1.) But this is not brought out in the book of Revelation; it does not fall within its revealed object; because the aim of the prophecy is to set forth the judgments of God, and not the secrets of His grace. Consequently, as the coming of Christ for His own is an event that does not at all directly affect the world, but is intensely a matter for Christ and the church, there is a veil naturally and fittingly drawn over it here. "Behold," says the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 15), "I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment," etc. This mystery will have taken place when Christ comes to meet us in the air; but the object of the Revelation is not to reveal the mystery of God's taking us on high, but rather of His not judging evil on the earth. Besides, it had been revealed fully already, and therefore was uncalled for. It was the appropriate object and function of the apostle Paul to show what was secret and heavenly to the church blessed with Christ in the heavenlies; but the object of John the seer is, above all, to show what would take place on earth after the church disappears from the scene.

Consequently, all this double scene of worship on: high is only preliminary to the great body of the prophetic visions. The object of the book is to unveil the series of judgments that are to fall on the earth, not the gathering of the saints to Christ in heaven. At the same time, you have the fullest confirmation of the doctrines of St. Paul, because, before the blows of divine displeasure fall, the prophet is taken up, he beholds and records the heavenly saints as already gathered in a glorified state. He notifies to us thrones that never were seen in heaven before, filled already with men risen or changed. In chap. 5 the elders and living creatures join in worship, and sing, "Thou hast redeemed [us?] to God by thy blood." Supposing we do not accept the reading ἡμᾶς or "us" (which I am quite willing,

with Lachmann, Tischendorf, and others, to allow may not be genuine), still they are clearly saints who thus address the Lamb. The position of the elders on thrones, their clothing, their functions with the bowls full of odours, &c., prove their redemption, even if they only sung of others expressly, or of the abstract truth. There could be no such ornament as the crown of gold, no such place of dignity for the creature as a throne in God's presence, without being bought by the Lamb's blood. No created being whatsoever could have such a royal and priestly rank on high, except in virtue of such a purchase.

It is to be remarked that here (chap. 5) we have some advance. A seven-sealed book appears in the hand of God. The praises of the last chapter did not go beyond creation and providence; but this in no way exhausted what God had to make known to His own. He was about to reveal quite a new thing — the special process by which He will put the Lord Jesus in possession of the inheritance of creation. Such is the object of the book here seen in the vision — the different forms of judgment that the Lord will apply, eventually issuing in the taking of the kingdom by the Lord Jesus, and His heavenly ones reigning along with Him. "I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne, a book written within and on the backside:" that is, it was full to overflowing. It was not written as an ordinary scroll, within only. There was so much to say, that it was written on the back. So in Ezekiel 2: 9, 10 the Jewish prophet had a roll of a book shown; "and he spread it before me; and it was written within and without." It was "sealed with seven seals" — shut up impenetrably therefore, as far as the creature was concerned. "And I saw an angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?"

No one was found, no one able, it is said, — to open the book; and none able, because not one was worthy. But if John weeps much because none was found worthy, one of the elders — for they enter into the mind of Christ — consoles the prophet, saying "Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed (or conquered) to open the book." And Jesus opens the book, not simply as a divine person; not simply as the perfectly obedient man; but by overcoming — by the all-prevailing efficacy of His precious blood. He was worthy and able. But He took it on the ground of the price He paid, and not on personal worth or strength. Had He done it out of personal title alone, where were we? He did it on the ground of the price He paid — all our boast and joy except, indeed, that the best of all that His purchase brings is to delight our souls in Him who thus bought us — not merely in the blessings He has bounteously given us.

Jesus, then, is conqueror; but when He comes forward it is not as a lion, but as a Lamb. He is proclaimed as a Lion, but when beheld, it is a Lamb as it had been slain. The One who asserts this mighty and majestic power of God, and especially in connection with the hopes of Israel — that Blessed One — is seen to be the earth-rejected man, the holy sufferer whom the world would not have or suffer to live. Was it worthy of Him? It rejected Him, but rejected Him into the home and glory of God, where He is now seen as the Lamb. And mark, it is not as He descended: He came down the only begotten Son — I do not say leaving His Father's bosom. Oh, no! He never left it: how could He leave it? He was a divine person, and, therefore, even if looked at as a man, it could be said, "the Son of man which is *in heaven*" — not merely, who was, or, who was to be, but "who *is* in heaven." None but He could say this, and, therefore, however much you hold fast — (and you cannot too tenaciously hold fast — the reality of His manhood; and whoever does not hold it fast, is no Christian at all) — let it never disparage His deity; I do not say merely His *divinity*. We talk about the *divinity* of this book, the Bible, but not so rightly of the divinity of Christ as of His "*deity*" or Godhead.

Here then He is spoken of as the Lamb, in particular as the slain Lamb contrasted with the world-powers or ravaging beasts of prey, and especially the one yet to rise and trample down for the last time the people of God on the earth. The Lamb sits there, but rises and takes the book out of the hand of

Him that sat upon the throne, and then all heaven is filled with the praise of the Lamb as well as of God.*

* It is well to note that Rev. 5: 14 ends, according to the best authority, with "worshipped." "Him that liveth for ever and ever" is a spurious addition. In fact, the elders worshipped *both*.

If He took that book, it was not merely to read it Himself; it was in love to make all plain for us. What could make it plainer to Him? He opens the seals, and tells us the contents. He unfolds the mind of God. Oh, may we heed it!

This sketch necessarily could not be very complete but in it I have designedly passed over nothing of importance, as it has occurred to me in glancing over the portion of the word of God before us. I trust it is at least clear to those who have given me their hearing, that the elders were beyond doubt men; that they were men no longer on earth, but in heaven; that they constitute a new class seen for the first time above. Who compose them? I have not as yet sought to answer.

For my own part I strongly suspect that the twenty-four elders include the Old Testament saints as well as the New, up to the moment of the Lord's coming to receive them to Himself. I make this remark, because we find afterwards that when the change takes place, and the elders as such are no more seen, a new symbol is seen to take its place (Rev. 19). You have the Bride; but besides her you have certain persons that are said to be blessed — guests invited to the marriage-supper of the Lamb. It need scarce be said, that nobody thinks of inviting a bride to her own marriage feast: others may be invited there of course. It seems to me, therefore, very plain that others are to be at the marriage-supper of the Lamb besides the bride.

Hence nothing is more easy than to understand that the twenty-four elders might include both Old and New Testament saints, from Revelation 4 to chap. 19, when the Bride and the guests are substituted for the elders. Then it becomes a question of the church in her own proper character of communion with Christ; and you find under the twenty-four elders a twofold company — the Bride, with others who were united for a certain end, but not in everything. This is merely a question of spiritual judgment, and depends on a great deal of scripture to decide it.

I do not therefore throw out more than a suggestion now. I have endeavoured to keep to the grand landmarks of the subject, which are especially necessary for all the children of God. What I have been saying makes this plain to any one. We see the wisdom of God in arranging this mystical history of the church. Had it been a literal history of the church, a prophetic mapping out of all with great plainness, the consequence would have been that people would have ceased to look for Christ's coming; but inasmuch as the seven churches were there before the apostle's mind at the time when this book was written, there was no check on the continual waiting for Christ. On the other hand, if the church tarried here below, these seven churches would expand, as it were, into a larger bearing; and as long as the church was continued, it would be always adding more and more completeness, more filling up, as it were, the previously unseen points which would then become obvious and salient.

This is the true way for faith; it is so that all the New Testament is written. If the Lord represents the ten virgins as showing Christendom waiting for Christ, it is the same virgins that went forth originally and fell asleep afterwards, who go in with the Lord. No doubt we (looking back *ex post facto*, as people call it,) can see (when the history is behind us) that it was designed to take in the various generations of Christians. But as far as the parable is concerned, it contemplates only that one generation which was existing at the time the parable was put forth. In this I cannot but see the deep mind of God. Does it not seem to you to be consummate wisdom for Him so to write His word that there should be in it nothing at variance with the hope of the Christian in always expecting Christ, and

yet that, when the delay takes place, you can see that He knew of the delay perfectly well, but that He did not open it out in word so as to hinder saints from always waiting for the Lord Jesus? Thus manifestly all is true, holy, good, and wisely ordered.

May the Lord bless His truth! May there be one desire given to the children of God, so that knowing Him as our life, having Him as our righteousness, we may wait for Him as the hope of our hearts!

W.K.