

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH



REASON TOGETHER STUDY

WHO ARE THE TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS IN HEAVEN?

→ REVELATION 4-5 ←

What can we know without claiming more than God revealed?

SERMON & PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley
Pastor & Teacher

REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

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Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Whether you have worshiped with us many times...

or whether this is your first time with us...

you are welcome here.

We are especially grateful for every honored guest who has joined us today.

Our invitation is simple.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father...

we come before You because You alone are God.

Give us wisdom as we open a difficult portion of Scripture.

Keep us from being careless with Your Word.

Keep us from pretending to know what You have not revealed.

And keep us from missing the truth You have placed plainly before us.

Turn our curiosity into worship.

Turn our questions toward Christ.

And let the Holy Spirit guide us into truth.

We ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

Our Scripture reading is Revelation chapter four, beginning with verse one.

"After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven..."

"and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me..."

"which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter."

"And immediately I was in the spirit..."

"and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne."

"And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone..."

"and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald."

"And round about the throne were four and twenty seats..."

"and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting..."

"clothed in white raiment..."

"and they had on their heads crowns of gold."

Then verse ten says...

"The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne..."

"and worship him that liveth for ever and ever..."

"and cast their crowns before the throne, saying..."

"Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power..."

"for thou hast created all things..."

"and for thy pleasure they are and were created."

Before we continue, let me remind you how giving works at Reason Together Church.

We do not pass a plate.

Our guests are never expected to give.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to support your home church.
For those who are part of this work and feel led to give, a giving box is available in the back.
God does not need reluctant money.
The Bible tells us that God loveth a cheerful giver.
If you received a guest card, we ask only for your first name and email address.
We would also love to continue the conversation with you at Reason Together Cafe.
The coffee is free.
The refills on conversation are free too.
And COFFEE reminds us that Christ Offers Forgiveness For Everyone Everywhere.
Now let us return to the throne room.
John sees a door opened in heaven.
He hears a voice like a trumpet.
He is taken in the spirit.
And the first thing that captures the scene is not an angel.
It is not an elder.
It is not a crown.
It is a throne.
"Behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne."
That may be the most important sentence in this entire vision.
The throne is not empty.
Heaven is not in confusion.
God is not waiting to see what happens next.
The world may look out of control from where we stand.
It does not look out of control from where God sits.
Then John sees twenty-four lesser thrones arranged around the throne of God.
Upon those thrones sit twenty-four elders.
They wear white.
They wear crowns of gold.
They possess authority.
They participate in heavenly worship.
And Christians have asked for centuries...

Who are they?

Some will answer immediately.

They are the church.

Others will say they are the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles.

Others will say they are angels in God's heavenly council.

Still others have tried to name twenty-four particular men from the Bible.

But before we choose an answer...

we must notice something important.

John tells us what they wear.

He tells us where they sit.

He tells us what they hold.

He tells us what they sing.

He tells us when they fall down.

He even records conversations with two of them.

But John never tells us one of their names.

Not one.

That means we must approach this question with two qualities that do not always live together.

We need courage to investigate.

And we need humility to stop where revelation stops.

Good Bible study asks three questions.

What does the Bible state?

What does the Bible reasonably suggest?

And what has the Bible left unrevealed?

Let us begin with what it states.

The elders appear twelve times in the book of Revelation.

They sit upon twenty-four thrones in chapter four.

They wear white raiment and golden crowns.

They fall before God.

They cast their crowns before Him.

They praise Him as Creator.

In chapter five, one elder tells John not to weep.

He announces that the Lion of the tribe of Juda has prevailed.

The elders fall before the Lamb.

They have harps and golden vials full of odors, which are the prayers of saints.

They participate in the new song of redemption.

They join the worship of heaven.

In chapter seven, one elder asks John about the great multitude.

Then the elder explains that they came out of great tribulation.

In chapter eleven, the elders give thanks when God takes His great power and reigns.

In chapter fourteen, the hundred and forty-four thousand sing before the throne, the living creatures and the elders.

In chapter nineteen, the elders fall down again and say...

"Amen; Alleluia."

Those are facts from the text.

The elders are not silent ornaments around God's throne.

They think.

They speak.

They understand.

They teach.

They worship.

They appear to be real personal beings.

But the number twenty-four appears designed to represent something larger than twenty-four isolated individuals.

In the Old Testament, David organized the priesthood into twenty-four courses.

First Chronicles chapter twenty-four gives the list.

There were many priests...

but twenty-four organized divisions represented the complete priestly service.

Then First Chronicles chapter twenty-five organizes the temple musicians.

They also served in twenty-four divisions.

And what instruments did they use?

The Bible mentions cymbals, psalteries and harps.

Now return to Revelation chapter five.

What do the twenty-four elders possess?

Harps.

What else do they possess?

Golden bowls filled with incense.

The picture is not random.

Twenty-four elders...

priestly service...

temple worship...

harps...

incense...

The earthly temple appears to have been a shadow of worship in heaven.

This does not tell us every elder's name.

But it does tell us something about their function.

They form a complete priestly and worshiping council before God.

There is another possible meaning in the number.

Israel had twelve tribes.

Jesus appointed twelve apostles.

In Revelation chapter twenty-one, the New Jerusalem has twelve gates bearing the names of Israel's tribes.

It also has twelve foundations bearing the names of the apostles.

Twelve plus twelve gives twenty-four.

That makes it reasonable to see the elders as representing the whole redeemed people of God under the Old and New Covenants.

But notice our wording.

Reasonable.

Possible.

Suggestive.

The Bible never divides the elders into two rows and says...

These twelve are patriarchs...

and these twelve are apostles.

It never gives us their names.

It never tells us whether Paul or Matthias occupies an apostolic place.

When Scripture does not answer a question, confidence cannot manufacture an answer.

Now let us consider why many teachers believe the elders are glorified human beings.

First, they are called elders.

Throughout Scripture, elders are mature human leaders.

Israel had elders.

Cities had elders.

Churches had elders.

The New Testament does not clearly identify an order of angels called elders.

That does not make an angelic interpretation impossible.

But it places the first weight on the human side of the scale.

Second, the elders wear white raiment.

Only a few verses earlier, Jesus promised the faithful in Sardis...

"They shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy."

He said...

"He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment."

Then John enters heaven and sees elders clothed in white.

Angels can also appear in white garments.

So white clothing does not settle the question.

But within Revelation, the connection to the overcomers is strong.

Third, they wear crowns.

Jesus told the church in Smyrna...

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

He told Philadelphia...

"Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown."

Paul spoke of an incorruptible crown.

He spoke of a crown of righteousness.

Peter spoke of a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

Then John sees twenty-four elders wearing crowns.

The Greek word is stephanos.

It is a crown of victory, honor or reward.

That sounds much like the reward promised to faithful believers.

Fourth, they sit upon thrones.

Jesus had just promised the overcomer in Laodicea...

"To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne."

Then John sees crowned elders sitting on thrones.

Again, the connection is difficult to miss.

Fifth, Revelation distinguishes them from angels.

Chapter five says that John heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the living creatures and the elders.

Chapter seven says that all the angels stood round about the throne and about the elders and the four living creatures.

The elders are not simply placed within the undifferentiated company of angels.

They are named as a distinct group.

Put those facts together.

Human title.

White raiment promised to believers.

Crowns promised to believers.

Thrones promised to believers.

Priestly worship associated with the redeemed.

Distinction from all the angels.

The evidence leans toward glorified human representatives.

There is another distinction we need to make.

Representing the redeemed does not automatically mean being identical with every redeemed person.

The twenty-four elders are not the great multitude.

One of the elders explains the great multitude to John.

The elders are not the hundred and forty-four thousand.

That company sings before the elders.

The elders speak of prophets, saints and servants who will be rewarded.

They remain a distinct council.

But a representative remains distinct from the people he represents.

The head of a priestly course was not every priest in that course.

The head of a tribe was not every person in that tribe.
An ambassador is not every citizen of the nation he represents.
So the language must be careful.
We should not say that these twenty-four individuals are numerically all redeemed people.
We may say that they appear to represent the redeemed people of God.
That distinction allows us to respect everything Revelation says.
It recognizes their connection to the saints.
And it recognizes their separation from other redeemed companies.
We should also ask whether twenty-four is literal or symbolic.
Sometimes people speak as though it must be one or the other.
But Biblical symbols can involve real persons.
Jesus is a real person.
Yet Revelation shows Him as a Lamb.
The churches of Asia were real churches.
Yet Revelation represents them as lampstands.
The elders can be twenty-four real persons...
while their number, garments, crowns and positions communicate a larger truth.
Two elders speak individually to John.
That is evidence of real personality.
All twenty-four act together in worship.
That is evidence of representative purpose.
Real and symbolic are not enemies.
Now place yourself among the first Christians who heard this book read aloud.
Rome appeared to possess the throne.
The emperor claimed honor.
Governors exercised power.
Local officials could make life difficult for anyone who refused the worship expected by the culture.
Some Christians had lost opportunities.
Some had endured poverty.
Some faced prison.
Some would face death.

Then Revelation opens a door in heaven.
The first-century believer does not see Caesar's throne at the center.
He sees God's throne.
He sees other rulers with crowns.
But those rulers do not defend their status before God.
They fall.
They do not demand that the Creator honor them.
They cast their crowns before Him.
The earthly emperor might demand that others bow.
Heaven reveals the One before whom every ruler must bow.
That was not abstract symbolism to a persecuted church.
It was courage.
The throne of Rome would pass.
The throne in heaven would remain.
The elders also teach us something about mature leadership.
We often recognize a leader by the chair he occupies.
Heaven recognizes leadership by the throne a servant is willing to leave.
We often recognize achievement by the crown a person displays.
Heaven recognizes worship by the crown a person lays down.
The elders never use their nearness to God to make themselves the object of attention.
One uses his voice to comfort a weeping apostle.
Another uses his knowledge to explain a redeemed multitude.
Their authority becomes service.
Their knowledge becomes instruction.
Their honor becomes worship.
That is what Christian leadership should look like now.
The pulpit is not a throne from which a pastor magnifies himself.
It is a place from which he points toward the Lamb.
A title is not a crown to protect.
It is a responsibility to return to God.
If our authority makes people impressed with us but does not help them see Jesus...

we have misunderstood authority.

If our knowledge of Revelation makes us proud of secrets other Christians do not know...

we have misunderstood Revelation.

The elders know mysteries.

But the mystery they announce is Christ.

But we must hear the other side.

The Bible contains other heavenly council scenes.

First Kings chapter twenty-two pictures the host of heaven standing around the Lord.

Job describes the sons of God presenting themselves before Him.

Daniel saw the Ancient of days seated while other thrones were set in place.

Heaven is not empty except for God and redeemed humanity.

There are ranks of heavenly beings.

There are authorities whose power comes entirely from God.

The elders know heavenly mysteries.

They explain visions to John in a manner similar to interpreting angels in Daniel and Zechariah.

They speak about the saints and the redeemed as groups that appear distinct from themselves.

For these reasons, some careful scholars understand them as angelic members of God's heavenly council.

That interpretation deserves respect.

It explains their heavenly authority.

It explains their interpreting role.

It explains their established presence around the throne.

But it still faces difficult questions.

Why are they called elders when angels are not ordinarily called elders?

Why does their appearance so closely match promises made to believers in the preceding chapters?

Why does Revelation distinguish them from all the angels?

The angelic view is possible.

But the glorified-human view better accounts for the complete description.

Now we must enter the most difficult textual question in the study.

Revelation chapter five, verse nine, reads in the King James Version...

"Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood..."

Verse ten continues...

"And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth."

If the elders say Christ redeemed us...

the question seems settled.

They must be redeemed people.

But ancient Greek manuscripts do not all read the same way at this point.

Many early witnesses do not include the word us in verse nine.

They say that Christ purchased people for God from every kindred, tongue, people and nation.

In verse ten, many manuscripts read them rather than us...

and they shall reign rather than we shall reign.

This does not mean someone secretly removed redemption from the Bible.

Every reading still proclaims that the Lamb purchased people by His blood.

The question is whether the singers include themselves grammatically among the purchased people.

There is another complication.

Revelation places the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders together in the scene.

Both groups fall before the Lamb.

Both participate in the movement of the song.

The four living creatures are heavenly creatures.

They are not sinners redeemed from Adam's fallen race.

Therefore, we should not build the entire identity of the elders upon one disputed pronoun.

This is not disrespect toward the King James Bible.

The King James translators faithfully translated the Greek text available to them.

Other translations reflect other manuscript evidence.

Our conclusion must come from all the evidence Scripture provides.

When all the evidence is gathered, where does it lead?

The twenty-four elders appear to be real heavenly individuals.

They form a priestly and royal council around God's throne.

Their number evokes the complete service of the temple.

Their white garments, crowns and thrones resemble promises given to God's faithful people.

Their title and their distinction from angels favor glorified human beings.

They most likely represent the complete redeemed people of God.

That may include the people of God under both the Old and New Covenants.
But we cannot identify twenty-four names.
We cannot prove that they are exactly the twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles.
We cannot declare that they represent only the New Testament church.
And we cannot make them carry the entire weight of our position on the timing of the rapture.
Some sermons reason this way.
The church is addressed on earth in chapters two and three.
John is called upward in chapter four.
The elders are then seen in heaven.
The judgments begin in chapter six.
Therefore, the elders must be the church after a pretribulation rapture.
That interpretation is possible.
The elders are certainly consistent with redeemed believers in heaven.
But John never calls his ascent the rapture.
He never says the elders have just arrived.
He never calls them the church.
And a heavenly vision does not always move according to a simple earthly clock.
Do not misunderstand me.
This study is not attempting to settle the rapture question.
It is saying that the twenty-four elders cannot settle it by themselves.
A doctrine is not strengthened when we make one passage say more than it says.
Truth does not need exaggeration.
There is also a temptation to fill the twenty-four seats with famous names.
Perhaps Abraham sits there.
Perhaps Moses.
Perhaps Elijah.
Perhaps Peter and Paul.
Some have included Enoch.
Some have included people raised after the death of Jesus in Matthew chapter twenty-seven.
But once we begin naming them, where do we stop?
Which sons of Jacob qualify?

Does the tribe of Levi have a seat?
What happens to Joseph when Ephraim and Manasseh are counted separately?
Is the twelfth apostolic seat occupied by Matthias or Paul?
Why would John not recognize the apostles if he saw them?
There may be answers someone can invent for every question.
But invented answers are not revealed answers.
The Lord did not ask us to complete heaven's seating chart.
He asked us to hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.
Another interpretation identifies the elders with the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Scriptures.
That view has historical interest.
But books do not naturally question John.
Books do not sit upon governing thrones.
Books do not cast crowns.
The elders may embody wisdom shaped by God's Word...
but the text presents them as persons.
Other theories connect them with hours of the day, stars in the sky or divisions of angels.
Those suggestions remind us how creative interpreters can become.
Creativity is valuable when it helps us see what is present.
It becomes dangerous when it supplies what is absent.
The best interpretation is not the one with the most imaginative details.
It is the one that explains the most Biblical evidence with the fewest unsupported assumptions.
Now consider the golden bowls.
Revelation says they are full of odors, which are the prayers of saints.
What a beautiful picture.
Prayers that seemed to disappear into the ceiling did not disappear.
Prayers whispered beside a hospital bed...
prayers spoken in the darkness of a sleepless night...
prayers offered through tears...
prayers that received no immediate answer...
are present before God.
The verse does not tell Christians to pray to the elders.

It does not say the elders answer prayers.
It tells us that the prayers of God's people are precious in heaven.
Then consider their crowns.
Earthly people struggle to obtain crowns.
We protect our titles.
We defend our positions.
We want our names remembered.
The elders possess the thrones we chase...
and they leave them to fall before God.
They possess the crowns we admire...
and they cast them at His feet.
They have authority...
but they confess that all authority belongs to Him.
Their crowns say they have received honor.
Their worship says God alone is worthy of it.
Perhaps that is why God did not give us their names.
Every time we become fascinated with the elders...
the elders point away from themselves.
We ask who they are.
They answer by falling down.
We ask which throne belongs to which person.
They leave their thrones.
We ask which crown each one earned.
They cast their crowns before God.
We ask whether one of them is Abraham, Moses, Peter or Paul.
One elder tells John...
Do not look at me.
"Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda."
That is the great turn in the passage.
John is weeping because no one is worthy to open the book.
The elders cannot open it.

The angels cannot open it.
John cannot open it.
Then an elder announces that the Lion has prevailed.
John turns to see the Lion.
And he sees a Lamb standing as it had been slain.
The Lion conquered as the Lamb.
Jesus did not prevail by avoiding the cross.
He prevailed through the cross.
He bore our sins.
He shed His blood.
He entered death.
And He rose victorious.
The Lamb stands because the grave could not hold Him.
He is worthy to take the book.
He is worthy to open its seals.
He is worthy to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing.
That is where every responsible study of the elders must end.
Not with the greatness of twenty-four servants...
but with the worthiness of one Savior.
The question is not only...
Who are the twenty-four elders?
The question is...
Do you know the Lamb they worship?
Understanding prophecy cannot save you.
Knowing every interpretation cannot forgive your sin.
Correctly identifying every symbol cannot make you righteous before God.
Only Jesus saves.
The Bible says all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.
The wages of sin is death.
But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Jesus died for our sins.

He was buried.
He rose again the third day.
He calls you to repent and believe.
If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior...
you may do so today.
You are not saved by repeating perfect words.
You are saved by grace through faith in Christ.
But you may express that faith to God in prayer.
Let us pray.
Heavenly Father...
I know that I am a sinner.
I cannot save myself.
I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins.
I believe that He was buried and rose again.
I turn from my sin and place my trust in Jesus alone.
Forgive me.
Save me.
Give me new life.
Help me follow Jesus as my Lord.
I ask this in the name of Jesus.
Amen.
We began by asking for the names of twenty-four elders.
God gave us something more important.
He showed us twenty-four thrones surrounding one greater throne.
He showed us twenty-four crowns lying before one worthy God.
He showed us twenty-four elders directing every eye toward one victorious Lamb.
We may not know their names.
We know the name they worship.
We may not know everything about their identity.
We know enough about their purpose.
They teach us to lay down every crown.

Your accomplishments belong before the throne.
Your reputation belongs before the throne.
Your plans belong before the throne.
Your ministry belongs before the throne.
Your disappointments belong before the throne.
Your unanswered questions belong before the throne.
One day every crown will be laid before Him.
We do not have to wait until heaven to begin.
Let us close in prayer.
Father, thank You for telling us what we need to know.
Forgive us when pride demands certainty You have not given.
Forgive us when curiosity becomes more important than obedience.
Teach us to open Your Word carefully.
Teach us to hold our conclusions humbly.
Teach us to cast every crown before You.
Thank You for the Lamb who was slain and now stands victorious.
Receive our worship, our service and our lives.
We pray for every person who trusted Christ today.
Strengthen them and lead them into fellowship with Your people.
We ask all of this in the name of Jesus.
Amen.
Bring your questions.
Open your Bible.
And when Scripture has spoken, believe it.
When Scripture gives evidence, examine it.
When Scripture remains silent, stay humble.
But in every question, keep your eyes upon the throne and the Lamb.
Aloha Nui Loa.

REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

WHO ARE THE TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS IN HEAVEN?

Revelation 4:4, 10–11; Revelation 5:5–14

What can we know without claiming more than God revealed?

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

"The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne..." Revelation 4:10

Commentary in Brief

CENTRAL CONCLUSION The twenty-four elders are most likely real heavenly persons who represent the complete redeemed people of God in a priestly and royal capacity. The description of their thrones, white garments and victor's crowns immediately follows Christ's promises to faithful overcomers. Their number also recalls the twenty-four priestly and musical divisions of David's temple organization.

The conclusion should remain qualified. Revelation does not give their names, divide them into patriarchs and apostles or call them the raptured church. A serious alternative identifies them as angelic members of a heavenly council. Revelation 5:9-10 also contains textual variants that prevent 'redeemed us' from serving as the sole proof of human identity.

John's central interest is functional and theological. The elders surrender their crowns, leave their thrones, interpret the victory of Christ and lead worship. Their every action moves attention from themselves to God and the Lamb.

1. The Real Question

The title asks for identity, but the interpretive task is broader. Revelation gives enough information to compare responsible possibilities while withholding enough information to forbid dogmatism. The pastor must therefore offer a conclusion whose confidence matches the evidence.

The question is not whether interpretation is permitted. Symbols invite interpretation. The question is whether an interpretation remains accountable to the text. The best method separates explicit description, cumulative inference and unanswered speculation.

2. The Throne Before the Elders

Revelation 4:2 establishes the controlling reality: a throne is set in heaven and One sits upon it. Everything else is located in relation to that throne. The rainbow surrounds it, lightning and voices proceed from it, lamps burn before it, living creatures occupy its immediate vicinity and the elders' lesser thrones encircle it.

The elders possess authority, but Revelation visually subordinates their authority before describing any act they perform. Their importance is genuine and derivative. The occupied throne would have reassured churches facing Roman coercion, internal compromise and persecution. Earthly power does not vacate God's heavenly government.

3. Revelation 4 4

John sees twenty-four elders seated on twenty-four thrones, clothed in white raiment and crowned with gold. The KJV translates the same Greek noun as 'seats' for their thrones, but the underlying word is thronos. They do not occupy benches around God's throne. They possess subordinate thrones.

The threefold description of position, garment and crown becomes interpretively significant because Revelation 2-3 has just promised faithful believers a crown of life, white raiment and a place with Christ upon His throne. The verbal and thematic proximity favors a representative connection with the overcomers.

4. Revelation 4 10 and 11

The elders repeatedly fall before the One upon the throne. Their worship includes bodily surrender, the relinquishing of crowns and spoken praise. They confess God's worthiness on the ground of creation: all things exist because He willed and created them.

Casting crowns interprets the thrones correctly. Heavenly reward never becomes autonomous status. Whatever victory the crown signifies and whatever authority the throne signifies return in worship to God. Christian application should avoid romantic speculation about possessing crowns and emphasize the surrender for which crowns exist.

5. Revelation 5 5

When John weeps because no one is worthy to open the scroll, one elder speaks. His message is Christological: 'Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed.' The elder understands Scripture, recognizes fulfillment and directs the seer toward Christ.

His role resembles an interpreting angel, which supports the heavenly-council view. It also resembles a mature teacher among God's people, which fits the human-elder view. The more important observation is that the elder uses his knowledge to reveal Christ rather than himself.

6. Revelation 5 6 through 8

John hears of a Lion but sees a Lamb standing as slain. The Lamb occupies the center of the throne-room action. The elders fall before Him as they fall before God, contributing to Revelation's presentation of Jesus within divine worship.

Harps signify praise. Golden bowls of incense signify the prayers of saints. The combination evokes temple worship. The elders' possession of these objects does not establish that believers should address prayers to them. Revelation interprets the contents, not an additional heavenly mediation system.

7. Revelation 5 9 and 10

The new song celebrates the Lamb's worthiness because He was slain and purchased a people for God from every tribe, language, people and nation. Redemption is particular in price and

universal in reach. The blood of Christ creates a multinational kingdom of priests who will reign upon the earth.

The KJV reads the first-person forms 'us' and 'we.' A large portion of earlier manuscript evidence supports third-person forms or an omitted object in verse 9. Modern versions commonly supply 'people' in verse 9 and read 'them' and 'they' in verse 10. The central doctrine of blood redemption remains unchanged, but the variant affects the elders' self-identification.

Because the four living creatures are joined to the elders in the scene, the first-person reading raises a further grammatical question. It is unwise to make the entire case for redeemed-human identity rest upon this verse. The broader portrait provides a stronger cumulative case.

8. Revelation 5 11 through 14

John hears innumerable angels around the throne, living creatures and elders. The groups remain distinguishable while their worship converges upon the Lamb. Revelation 7:11 repeats the distinction and speaks of 'all the angels' around the elders.

This language weighs against classifying the elders as ordinary angels. It does not logically exclude a special heavenly order, since the four living creatures are also distinguished from the angels. The passage establishes corporate distinction more securely than ontological classification.

9. Revelation 7 11 through 14

One elder asks John to identify the white-robed multitude. John defers to the elder, who explains that they came out of great tribulation and washed their robes in the Lamb's blood. The elder again performs an interpretive and pastoral function.

The elder is distinct from the multitude he describes. If the elders represent the redeemed, representation must not be confused with numerical identity. A representative council can speak about another redeemed company while still symbolizing the people of God corporately.

10. Revelation 11 16 through 18

At the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the elders leave their thrones and fall upon their faces. They thank God because He has taken His great power and reigned. They interpret judgment as the rightful answer to raging nations and the appointed time for rewarding God's servants.

Their worship is morally serious. Heaven's praise includes agreement with God's justice. This does not authorize vindictiveness among Christians. It teaches confidence that final judgment belongs to the righteous Judge rather than to private revenge.

11. Revelation 14 3 and 19 4

The 144,000 sing a song before the throne, living creatures and elders. The elders are witnesses to a redeemed company whose experience is distinctive. Their final appearance occurs in Revelation 19:4, where they fall with the living creatures and answer, 'Amen; Alleluia.'

Their disappearance after chapter 19 may reflect the completion of their representative role once the marriage, final victory and New Jerusalem dominate the vision. That explanation is plausible but not stated and should remain an inference.

12. The Twenty Four Priestly Courses

First Chronicles 24 records David's organization of the Aaronic priesthood into twenty-four divisions. The arrangement allowed the entire priesthood to serve through ordered courses. A head represented more than himself.

Revelation's use of twenty-four in a heavenly temple setting naturally recalls this pattern. The elders' number can therefore communicate the completeness of priestly service without implying that each elder is one of the ancient course heads.

13. The Twenty Four Musical Courses

First Chronicles 25 adds a frequently neglected connection. Levitical musicians were organized into twenty-four divisions and ministered with harps and other instruments. Revelation's twenty-four elders also possess harps and lead heavenly praise.

The priestly and musical structures together provide a more concrete Old Testament background than numerical imagination alone. They explain number and function at the same time.

14. The Twelve Plus Twelve Proposal

Revelation 21 joins twelve tribal gates and twelve apostolic foundations in the New Jerusalem. The pattern supports the idea that twenty-four can symbolize the unified people of God across both covenants.

It does not provide a roster. The text never identifies twelve elders as sons of Jacob or tribal heads and twelve as apostles. The proposal is strongest as corporate symbolism and weakest when interpreters begin assigning seats.

15. Elders as Glorified Humans

The human-representative position rests upon a cumulative pattern. Elder is normally a human title. White garments, crowns and enthronement are promised to faithful believers. The redeemed are a kingdom of priests. The elders perform priestly worship and are distinguished from all the angels.

The strongest form of the position identifies them broadly with the complete redeemed people. Limiting them exclusively to the New Testament church requires additional assumptions about Revelation's chronology. Identifying them as particular named men requires still more assumptions.

16. Elders as Heavenly Council Beings

The alternative position places Revelation 4 within Biblical throne-room traditions. The heavenly host surrounds God in 1 Kings 22. The sons of God appear before Him in Job. Daniel sees thrones placed around the Ancient of Days. The elders' thrones, crowns and interpretive knowledge fit a celestial council.

This position explains their established heavenly presence and third-person speech concerning redeemed groups. Its difficulty is the absence of a clear Biblical class of angels called elders and the close relationship between their appearance and promises made to the churches.

17. A Real Council with Representative Meaning

The text does not require a choice between real persons and symbols. Revelation's symbolic visions contain real agents. The Lamb is not unreal because His appearance signifies sacrifice and victory. The lampstands signify real churches.

Individual elders speak to John. Corporate features communicate theological meaning. The balanced reading treats them as real heavenly persons whose number, clothing, crowns and functions represent a larger reality.

18. The Raptured Church Claim

The church-only interpretation observes that Revelation addresses churches through chapter 3, changes to a heavenly scene in chapter 4 and begins judgment in chapter 6. Some identify John's call upward as a picture of the rapture and the elders as the arrived church.

Neither identification is explicit. John is called as a prophet to receive revelation. The elders are already seated and are not described as newly arrived. Visions can move across time and perspective. The elders may be compatible with a pretribulation system, but they do not prove it.

19. Do They Have Resurrected Bodies

Visible garments, crowns and posture within a vision do not require conclusions about bodily chronology. Revelation 6 depicts souls under the altar receiving white robes while awaiting the completion of martyrdom. Symbolic visibility can portray a genuine spiritual state.

Therefore, the elders' clothing cannot establish that a bodily resurrection or rapture has already occurred. The text is concerned with honor, purity and authority rather than supplying an anatomy of the intermediate state.

20. The Prayers of Saints

The bowls assure suffering believers that prayer reaches heaven. Incense imagery conveys value, acceptance and participation in God's purposes. Revelation 8 later connects incense, prayer and divine action.

Pastoral application should encourage persistent prayer. The text does not command invocation of elders or saints, describe the elders as hearing prayers addressed to them or assign them the saving mediation that belongs to Christ.

21. The Meaning of Their Crowns

Stephanos usually denotes a wreath of victory or honor. The New Testament applies crown imagery to disciplined service, perseverance under trial, righteousness and faithful shepherding. The elders embody completed honor.

Their decisive act is not wearing the crowns but casting them down. Reward produces worship rather than rivalry. The church should speak of heavenly reward in a way that magnifies grace, since no crown can remain upon the head when its wearer beholds the worthiness of God.

22. The Meaning of Their Thrones

The twenty-four thrones communicate delegated government. They also frame the central throne without competing with it. Revelation's political theology places every legitimate ruler beneath the Creator and Lamb.

For the first-century churches, this imagery contradicted imperial absolutism. For contemporary believers, it judges the desire to make title, influence or ministry position ultimate. Christian authority is proven by willingness to leave the seat and bow.

23. Why They Remain Unnamed

Revelation can name angels, apostles, tribes, cities and kings. The absence of names is therefore meaningful even if its purpose is not explicitly explained. John consistently identifies the group by number and office.

Their anonymity harmonizes with their actions. They do not narrate their achievements. They surrender crowns, announce Christ and assent to God's glory. The text permits the preacher to observe that heaven knows how to possess honor without making personal fame the center.

24. Historical Interpretations

Victorinus of Pettau represents an early Christian identification of twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles. Later interpreters also connected the elders with the twenty-four books of the Old Testament. Reformation and evangelical preaching commonly treated them as representatives of glorified saints.

Modern commentators remain divided between redeemed-human and angelic-council readings. The diversity is not evidence that the text has no meaning. It shows that several images overlap and that John did not make biological identity his controlling concern.

25. Sermonic Contributions

Spurgeon's treatment is strongest when it turns the elders toward Christian maturity, nearness to Christ and priestly worship. MacArthur is strongest in tracing garments, crowns and thrones back to the promises of Revelation 2-3. Guzik effectively combines priestly courses with the whole people of God. Bauckham supplies the strongest heavenly-council and political reading.

RTS-111 should receive insights from each without copying structure or language. The sermon must allow competing arguments to be heard fairly, state the cumulative verdict and preserve the larger purpose of Revelation 4-5: worship of the Creator and the slain Lamb.

26. Old Testament Throne Room Background

Revelation 4 gathers imagery from several Old Testament throne visions. Isaiah 6 places the Lord high and lifted up while seraphim proclaim His holiness. Ezekiel 1 presents living creatures, brilliant fire, a crystal-like expanse, a throne and a rainbow-like radiance. Daniel 7 presents the Ancient of Days, multiple thrones and a heavenly court associated with judgment.

John does not merely repeat one vision. He combines and develops familiar Biblical images around the revelation of God and the Lamb. The elders have no exact counterpart in Isaiah or Ezekiel, which makes their appearance especially noticeable. Daniel's plural thrones provide a judicial parallel but do not identify their occupants as the same twenty-four elders.

First Kings 22:19 and Job 1:6 demonstrate that Scripture can speak of heavenly assemblies without compromising the uniqueness of God. Every heavenly being remains created, subordinate and accountable. The elders' crowns and thrones therefore communicate delegated participation rather than rival sovereignty.

27. Isaiah 24 23

Isaiah foretells that the moon and sun will be ashamed when the Lord reigns in Mount Zion and Jerusalem and is glorious before His ancients. The KJV's 'ancients' translates a term for elders. Because the verse places elders in an eschatological scene of divine reign, it is often proposed as a direct Old Testament background for Revelation 4.

The difficulty is identification. Isaiah's elders may be honored human leaders before the reigning Lord. Some interpreters understand them as a heavenly council. The passage strengthens the concept of elders witnessing divine glory but does not decide whether Revelation's elders are angelic or human.

28. Greek Vocabulary

Presbyteroi, elders, is the plural of presbyteros. In ordinary New Testament use it describes older men or recognized leaders in Israel and the church. Revelation uses the term consistently for this

group after chapter 4. The familiar human usage creates a presumption, though not a demonstration, in favor of human identity.

Thronoi is the plural of thronos. The KJV uses 'seats' in Revelation 4:4, but John describes actual thrones. Their arrangement around God's throne portrays ordered authority. Stephanoi are crowns of victory or honor. Diadema is the word more specifically associated with a royal diadem in passages such as Revelation 19:12.

Leuke, white, belongs to Revelation's recurring imagery of purity, vindication and heavenly glory. The vocabulary must be interpreted through the book's patterns rather than assigned one rigid meaning. White clothing can describe angels and redeemed people.

29. Who Holds the Harps and Bowls

Revelation 5:8 says that the four living creatures and twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, 'having every one of them harps, and golden vials.' The nearest grammatical construction can be read as distributing the objects across the combined subject. Many interpreters regard the instruments and bowls as belonging particularly to the elders because harps and priestly bowls correspond more naturally with their representative worship.

The question affects the song in verse 9. If both groups possess the objects and sing every word, the KJV's first-person 'redeemed us' would include the living creatures. If the elders are the particular possessors and singers, that difficulty decreases. The syntax is not clear enough to bear a dogmatic identification.

The sermon should explain the problem without turning a worship passage into a technical lecture. The Commentary records the detail so the pastor is prepared if the question arises.

30. Manuscript Evidence and Translation

The textual history of Revelation is more complex than that of many New Testament books because fewer early manuscripts preserve the complete work and individual witnesses sometimes vary substantially. Revelation 5:9-10 contains several related variants involving the direct object of 'purchased,' first- or third-person pronouns and the present or future tense of reigning.

The Textus Receptus underlying the KJV reads first-person forms that make the singers speak of their own redemption. Codex Alexandrinus supports the absence of 'us' in verse 9, while other manuscripts add the pronoun in different positions. In verse 10, the third-person 'them' has strong support. The tense of 'reign' also varies between present and future forms.

A responsible explanation should avoid two errors. The first is pretending the variant does not exist because the KJV is preferred. The second is implying that textual variation removes the doctrine of redemption. Every principal form of the text declares that the Lamb's blood purchases a people for God. The disputed issue is the grammatical relationship of the singers to that people.

31. The Heavenly Temple

Revelation repeatedly describes heaven through temple imagery: lamps, incense, an altar, worship, priestly language and the ark of the covenant. The twenty-four elders belong naturally within this sacred setting. Their ordered number and musical-priestly objects resemble the organized service of Chronicles.

The relationship need not be a simple claim that the elders are resurrected Aaronic priests. Hebrews teaches that earthly sanctuary patterns reflect heavenly realities. Revelation can draw upon temple service to portray complete worship without transferring every earthly office literally into heaven.

This background strengthens the representative reading. Twenty-four does not need to be a secret code for twenty-four celebrities. It can announce that the worship and service before God are complete, ordered and ceaseless.

32. The Imperial Court Contrast

Revelation was addressed to churches living within the Roman imperial world. Thrones, crowns, acclamations of worthiness and acts of prostration carried political as well as religious associations. Earthly emperors surrounded themselves with honor and expected public demonstrations of loyalty.

John's vision relocates ultimate sovereignty. The central throne belongs to God. The Lamb receives universal praise. Lesser crowned rulers do not claim independent glory but surrender their crowns. The scene does not merely describe private devotion in heaven. It challenges every earthly authority that treats its delegated power as absolute.

Pastoral use should remain disciplined. The point is not to identify a specific Roman ceremony as the single source of John's picture. The throne room combines Biblical temple, prophetic and court imagery. Its theological message is clear: no earthly ruler occupies the highest throne.

33. Why Function Exceeds Identification

John's narrative spends little time debating what kind of beings the elders are. It spends considerable time showing what they do. They worship in response to the living creatures, announce the Lamb's victory, present the prayers of saints, interpret the multitude, praise divine judgment and assent to heaven's Hallelujah.

Their function forms a theology of mature heavenly service. Knowledge comforts the weeping. Authority bows. Reward is surrendered. Prayer is treasured. Judgment is trusted. Worship centers upon Creator and Redeemer.

This does not make the identity question unimportant. It places that question inside John's priorities. The sermon answers who they most likely are, then allows their conduct to answer why the Spirit showed them to the churches.

34. The Promises to the Overcomers

The sequence from Revelation 2-3 into chapter 4 deserves close attention. Smyrna receives the promise of a crown of life. Sardis is promised white raiment. Philadelphia is told to hold fast so that no one takes its crown. Laodicea is promised a place with Christ upon His throne. John then immediately sees crowned, white-clothed figures seated on thrones.

No single image is exclusive to redeemed humanity. Their combination and narrative placement form the argument. The elders visually embody a completed state corresponding to the churches' promised reward. This explains why so many evangelical interpreters see the church in them even when Revelation 5:9 is read in the third person.

The connection should be expressed as strong internal evidence rather than an inspired label. John does not add the interpretive formula used elsewhere, such as 'the lampstands which thou sawest are the seven churches.'

35. Revelation 20 and the Reigning Saints

Revelation 20:4 presents thrones and persons who receive judgment. Verses 4-6 describe faithful saints living and reigning with Christ. The passage demonstrates that enthroned human beings belong within Revelation's eschatological world.

Some interpreters identify the throne occupants of chapter 20 with the twenty-four elders. The text does not make that identification. The elders have twenty-four specifically numbered

thrones, while chapter 20 concentrates upon the vindicated saints and martyrs. The parallel supports human enthronement but not identity of the groups.

This is a useful example of Scripture compared with Scripture. A parallel may establish possibility and thematic coherence without proving that two descriptions name the same persons.

36. The Church Alone or All the Redeemed

If the elders are human representatives, the next question is the scope of their representation. The church-only view emphasizes the promises of Revelation 2-3 and a dispensational distinction between the church, Israel and Tribulation saints. The all-redeemed view emphasizes twenty-four as covenantal completeness and the union of tribes and apostles in Revelation 21.

The elders' speech about prophets, saints and servants does not require that they belong to none of those categories. A representative assembly can speak of the community corporately. Yet their distinction from several redeemed companies cautions against equating them exclusively with any one visible group in the vision.

The broad phrase 'complete redeemed people of God' is therefore the most defensible representative description. It affirms continuity without erasing every distinction in salvation history.

37. Major Objections and Responses

Objection: angels never wear crowns, so the elders must be human. Response: crown imagery strongly favors rewarded believers, but apocalyptic crowns can express delegated rule. The argument is cumulative rather than absolute.

Objection: the elders say 'redeemed us,' so no other evidence matters. Response: Revelation 5:9-10 contains a genuine textual variant and the four living creatures share the scene. The KJV reading is relevant but cannot function as the only proof.

Objection: the elders speak of saints as 'them,' so they cannot be human. Response: representatives can speak of represented people in the third person, and Biblical songs sometimes shift person and perspective.

Objection: if John is an apostle, he cannot see himself among twelve apostolic elders. Response: symbolic representation could include his office, but the larger problem remains that the text never identifies twelve apostles in the group.

Objection: admitting uncertainty makes the study useless. Response: the study reaches a best-supported verdict while refusing invented certainty. That is useful training in Biblical interpretation.

38. Questions the Congregation May Ask

Are the elders in heaven now? Revelation portrays them in the heavenly throne room, but the visionary and chronological standpoint should not be pressed beyond the text. John is shown heavenly reality and future events in a prophetic vision.

Can they hear our prayers? The bowls contain the prayers of saints, but Revelation does not explain a mechanism by which elders hear individual prayers. Prayer remains directed to God through Christ.

Will Christians receive crowns? The New Testament promises crowns in several contexts. The images communicate God's reward for faithful grace-enabled service. The elders demonstrate that rewards produce worship.

Can we know their names when we reach heaven? Scripture does not answer. Curiosity about future recognition should not be converted into present doctrine.

Does this passage prove a pretribulation rapture? It may fit that interpretation, but it does not independently prove it. The rapture question must be studied from all relevant passages.

39. A Model for Reasoning Together

RTS-111 can teach a reusable method. First, collect every occurrence rather than isolating the most convenient verse. Second, observe repeated vocabulary and literary sequence. Third, identify Old Testament backgrounds. Fourth, compare the strongest interpretations. Fifth, account openly for textual variants. Sixth, proportion confidence to the evidence.

This method refuses two false choices. Christians do not have to choose between dogmatism and saying that every interpretation is equally valid. Evidence can favor one conclusion while humility acknowledges what remains unresolved.

The method also protects the congregation from sensational teachers who claim secret knowledge. The Bible may contain mystery, but mystery is not permission to invent. The Spirit's purpose is served when careful investigation produces clearer worship and obedience.

40. Interpretive Confidence

High confidence: the elders are real personal members of a heavenly council, their authority is subordinate and their work is priestly, royal, interpretive and worshipful.

Moderate confidence: they represent the complete redeemed people and are themselves glorified human beings.

Lower confidence: twenty-four equals precisely twelve patriarchs plus twelve apostles.

Unsupported certainty: naming the elders, making them exclusively the church or using them alone to prove rapture timing.

41. Pastoral Application

The passage teaches humility in study. A pastor should not hide uncertainty, nor should uncertainty prevent a reasoned conclusion. Saying 'most likely' can be an act of fidelity when Scripture supplies cumulative evidence rather than an explicit identification.

The passage teaches surrender in leadership. Thrones and crowns become instruments of worship. The more authority a believer receives, the more clearly that authority should be laid beneath Christ.

The passage teaches confidence in prayer. The prayers of saints are not forgotten.

The passage teaches Christ-centered interpretation. The elder's great contribution is not revealing his own name but announcing the Lion and directing John toward the Lamb.

42. Gospel Center

No elder can open the scroll. No angel can open it. John cannot open it. Worthiness belongs to Christ. The Lion prevails through the apparent weakness of the slain Lamb.

The new song grounds Christ's worthiness in His sacrificial death and blood purchase. Salvation crosses every ethnic and linguistic boundary while remaining centered upon one Redeemer. The proper invitation calls hearers away from religious achievement and toward repentance and faith in the crucified and risen Jesus.

43. Final Pastoral Summary

The congregation should leave with a responsible answer: the twenty-four elders most likely are glorified human representatives forming a heavenly priestly-royal council for the complete redeemed people of God. The angelic-council view remains possible, and Scripture does not reveal individual names or a decisive rapture chronology.

The deeper lesson is not indecision but worship. The elders' thrones surround a greater throne. Their crowns lie before the Creator. Their teaching directs John toward the Lamb. When the study ends, the elders should be less an object of speculation and more an example of how every gift, office and victory is returned to God.

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