



PRESBYTERION

Covenant Seminary Review

Over the Rainbow:
A Sermon Based on Revelation 4:1–3

David B. Calhoun

Vol. 20, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 67–71

OVER THE RAINBOW: *A Sermon Based on Revelation 4:1-3*

David B. Calhoun*

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.

In the old movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, Judy Garland played the part of Dorothy and sang a song no doubt familiar to you:

Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high,
There's a land that I heard of, once in a lullaby.
Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.

Dorothy's search for a happy place where dreams come true takes her to the magical land of Oz and the Emerald City with all its glamour and glitter. Her life there, however, proves to be disappointing and hollow, and before long Dorothy longs to return to her small town in Kansas.

In *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America*, Paul Nathanson explores the enormous popularity and the countless interpretations of Dorothy and her journey to the land of Oz. Like Dorothy, Americans—and indeed all people—commit themselves to "the pursuit of happiness," hoping that around the next corner, or over the next hill, in another year or two, the dreams that they dare to dream really will come true. And like Dorothy they, too, know the bitter disappointment of finding what is tawdry and tarnished, cheap and unreal.

How can we avoid the disappointment of Oz? How can we find what is true and eternally satisfying? *There was a door standing open*

*David Calhoun, who holds a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary, is Professor of Church History and the recently appointed Dean of Faculty at Covenant Theological Seminary. "Climbing Rainbows" was originally presented as a chapel message for the students at Covenant Theological Seminary.

in heaven. We could never know reality, we could never know truth, we could never know the reason why things are the way they are, and "what must take place after this," and how we should, therefore, live, unless there was a door standing open in heaven. Without God's revelation, we should be lost, confused, and doomed to the frustrations of creating our own myths and chasing our own rainbows. But there is a door.

The chapel of the old Columbia Seminary, when it was located in Columbia, South Carolina, was a little building that had been a stable and carriage house. Dr. George Howe, professor in that school for over fifty years, wrote: "We were comforted by remembering that our Saviour was said to have been born in a stable and cradled in a manger; and so sweet have been our seasons of religious instruction and enjoyment in that place often since, that we have forgotten that it ever was a stable at all. We have 'looked,' sometimes, almost like John in Patmos, 'and behold a door opened' unto us also 'in heaven.'" Thank God, there is a door.

What do we see through heaven's opened door? We see *a throne.* A throne symbolizes authority, government, control. That means that this world and all history and our lives are part of an ordered plan. From first to last John's vision is dominated by this symbol of sovereignty. The final reality which will be standing when heaven and earth have passed away is the great white throne (Revelation 20:11). The last word is not confusion; it is not chaos; it is not chance; it is order, it is law, it is plan.

But if that was all John saw, how cold, how impersonal, how disappointing life would be. We would be like the ancient Stoics who believed in fate but not in God. They turned their hearts into stone and called it peace; it was magnificent, but it was not peace. "Rabbi" John Duncan of the Free Church of Scotland once wrote: "It is a blessed thing that we are not placed amid the grinding and wheeling of a great machine of a universe without guiding hand or animating heart. There is a God, there is a God. Jehovah, he is God, Jehovah, he is God."

John saw not only a throne in heaven. He saw a throne *with someone sitting on it.* Now we know that there is not only law and order; there is personal government. But who is the one who sits on the throne? What is he like? John makes no attempt to describe the figure on the throne apart from the brief and tantalizing words: *the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian.* The iridescent green jasper and the deep red carnelian were precious gems of the high priest's breastplate (Exodus 28:20) and foundation stones of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:18).

But how could a person have the appearance of jasper and carnelian? For the moment, John is content simply to gaze in wonder at the symbols of divine majesty and to look on the eternal light through

the mirror of the worshipping hosts of heaven, who day and night never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." In those words, however, we hear a name of the one whose appearance is like that of precious stones. John's book artistically and dramatically gathers up the whole of the New Testament's teaching about Jesus Christ. He is "the Son of God" (2:18) and the "one like the Son of Man" (1:13, 14:14). He is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" and "the Lamb, looking as if it had been slain" (5:5,6). He is "the faithful witness, the first born of the dead" (1:5). He is "the Holy and True" (3:7), "the Lord of Lords and King of Kings" (17:14), "the Alpha and Omega" (22:13). As magnificent as John's picture of Christ is, we can only glimpse his glory. John recognizes this when he gives Christ another name—a name "which no one knows except himself" (19:12). By this we are reminded that his name is the name that is above every name. And that our best response is to sing with Isaac Watts:

Join all the glorious names
Of wisdom, love and power,
That ever mortals knew,
That angels ever bore:
All are too mean to speak His worth,
Too mean to set my Savior forth.

John saw a throne. He saw someone—the Lord of glory—sitting on it. And then he saw *a rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircling the throne*. We know what the rainbow means. We know that it is a reminder of God's covenant with Noah, with its promise, its guarantee, that "his mercy is as great as his majesty" (Ecclesiasticus 2:18). The throne and the rainbow set forth the perfect balance of the divine character. They tell us that there will be no triumph of God's sovereignty at the expense of his mercy and no display of his mercy without his righteous rule.

The rainbow that John saw resembled *an emerald*. The refreshing green of the emerald was at one time thought to be good for eyesight. This emerald rainbow is certainly good for our spiritual eyesight. Is that the meaning of the rainbow like an emerald? Green is the central color in the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, *green*, violet, indigo, and blue. Is the heavenly rainbow a green rainbow? That would be disappointing. The beauty of the rainbow is in its seven colors. I read in a book entitled *Emerald and Other Beryls* that "the light that passes through the emerald contains all wave lengths, not just green or blue-green." Perhaps the green of this rainbow heightens and sharpens the other colors. Perhaps it strengthens and emboldens the delicate and transitory colors of the rainbow.

A rainbow is a delicate, fleeting, fragile thing—not God’s mercy but our grasp of it. We have it, and we lose it. But the real rainbow is like an emerald, solid and lasting. Earthly rainbows are produced by sun light and rain drops. Everything has to be just right for us to see them. But this rainbow is like an emerald. It remains. It does not change. It is the real rainbow of which all others are copies—fading flashes of this eternal beauty. It teaches us to think of the solidity, the permanence, the everlastingness of the mercy of the one who is the same “yesterday, today, and forever.”

There is something else unusual about the rainbow that John saw. It *encircled the throne*. The rainbows we see are partial, at best, when our view is unobstructed, a half-circle. But some people have seen rainbows that are complete circles. Occasionally mountain climbers see complete colored rings similar to those of a rainbow when there is an unusual configuration of sunlight and a cloud composed of droplets of uniform size below the observer. Complete circles of color are seen more often from airplanes. In fact, they are sometimes called pilot’s rainbows. Scientists have a name for such a rainbow; they call it “the glory.” You can read about it in an article entitled “The Glory” in the *Scientific American* (July 1974).

The solid emerald rainbow, unbroken in its perfection, sets forth perfectly the fullness of the mercy of God. The rainbows we see are partial—broken by clouds and buildings and by the horizon of the earth. We see the mercy but dimly through the clouds of sorrow and behind the obstructions of sin and unbelief. There are times when we see the rainbow more perfectly, but how few are those times and how quickly it fades. If pilots can get high enough above the clouds, they can see “the glory.” And so can we. Heaven is high enough, and looking over John’s shoulder we see it: a perfect circle unbroken by the things of earth and shining with an undimmed and unchanging brilliance. There is no end to that rainbow; there is no end to God’s mercy. He is, as the Shorter Catechism, puts it “infinite in his goodness.”

In this life—even with heaven’s open door before us—our understanding of both God’s sovereignty and his mercy is partial and faulty. Our ignorance, our finiteness, and our sin mean that we see, as Paul put it, “through a glass darkly.” But someday we will see “face to face.” We will have a complete and unfaltering knowledge of what we now grasp only in part. We will gaze forever in unbroken wonder at the rainbow encircling the throne.

But even in this life, taught by the Word, we can by faith sometimes see in the providences of God the complete rainbow. We can look through the shadows and the clouds and the limitations of our earthly horizons and see the rainbow around the throne. Benjamin Morgan Palmer—pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, South Carolina, and the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans,

Louisiana—saw the complete rainbow. His beloved wife of many years had died. A friend had written to console him. Dr. Palmer replied:

I will not speak, my brother, of my pain—let that be; it is the discipline of love, having its fruit in what is to be. But I will tell you how a gracious Father fills this cloud with Himself—and covering me in it, takes me into His pavilion. It is not what I would have chosen; but in this dark cloud I know better what it is to be alone with Him; and how it is best sometimes to put out the earthly lights, that even the sweetest earthly love may not come between Him and me. It is the old experience of love breaking through the darkness as it did long ago through the terrors of Sinai and the more appalling gloom of Calvary. I have this to thank Him for, the greatest of all His mercies, and then for this, that He gave her to me so long. *The memories of almost half a century encircle me as a rainbow.*

And so Dr. Palmer, during the storm, saw the complete rainbow surrounding him on earth as it encircles the throne in heaven. In the storms of our lives, may we, too, see the rainbow—at least in part and perhaps at times approaching its full glory—and know that “His mercy is as great as His majesty.”