

The Guardians of Holiness

A sermon about the way that the Word protects us.

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, April 28, 2024

The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night. Revelation 4:8

At the front of this church the Lord is depicted in the east window, with the twelve apostles below Him. It may not be clear from where you are sitting, but the apostles are all teaching. Their mouths are not open, but their hand gestures show that they are teaching and offering prayers from the Lord above them. Similarly, many of the windows in the church are there to teach us or remind us of things from the Word. None of them, however, actually do anything other than that.

The exception are the figures from our lessons at some of the doors and windows. You may not believe it, but they actually do what they depict. They are guards, and they prevent anyone from entering this space who does not love and worship the Lord.

They are at the doors to both the Ezekiel and the Michael towers, in the windows of the Michael tower and the south transept windows in this room and carved into the pillars of the Ezekiel tower. They are also carved into the vaulted ceiling of the inner sanctuary on the chancel where the Word is.

The creatures are guards.

When they appear in Ezekiel and Revelation it is not immediately obvious what their purpose is. But what these creatures actually do is control access to the Lord, who sits on the throne. They welcome people into His presence who love Him, crying out “*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!*” But they also prevent anyone from approaching who does not love Him. At the doors of the church they depict the fact that the Lord cannot “*be approached except by the good of love*” (*Apocalypse Explained* 313). No one can get past them who is not here to worship.

In our physical world, of course, we can't tell that this is happening. People's inner feelings are their own business. The stone, metal and glass sentinels are symbolic. But what they do is absolutely real, and they function with perfect accuracy. No one, in their heart of hearts, can be here unless they want to be here.

In a sense, the one task of our lives is to accept these creatures' invitation to worship and be admitted into the house of the Lord. All we have to do is get past those guards. That is what our life is about. In a sense the entire book of Revelation is about making it possible for the human race to withstand the scrutiny of these guards and enter the courts of the Lord. By the end of the book the “*tabernacle of God is with men*” (21:3). Everyone is in that court.

One way to think of these guards is as being like the family dog.

Dogs are friendly, welcoming, and harmless to those they know, but constantly watchful, instantly challenging everyone else. No one can get into your house without the dog's approval. Yet once a person is in and accepted, most dogs, no matter how large and fearsome, become friendly and playful. So the cherubim in this story, despite their awesome appearance, are not dangerous or unfriendly. They both welcome and guard at the same time.

The creatures in Ezekiel and Revelation

According to the Heavenly Doctrine, the beasts in Revelation and Ezekiel are the same. The descriptions do seem somewhat different, such as that each of Ezekiel's creatures had four faces and also wheels, whereas in Revelation each is separate. But there were four, and as John saw an eagle, a lion, a person and a calf, Ezekiel saw an eagle, a



lion, a person and an ox. Calves and oxen have similar meanings, each having to do with how people are affected by what is true and good (*Apocalypse Revealed* 242; *Apocalypse Explained* 600.14).

When the four living creatures appear to Ezekiel it is not clear what their purpose is. But eventually a throne appears above them, and we see that their role is similar to that of the creatures that John saw (*Ezekiel* 1:26). This is even clearer later in the book after Ezekiel witnesses abominations in the temple in Jerusalem. The four creatures fly to Jerusalem, extract the “glory” from the temple, and take it away to a safe location (*10:18*), to be returned only after Ezekiel witnesses the creation of an entirely new temple (*43:4*). They are there to safeguard the Lord’s glory.

In Revelation the beasts play a role in directing what happens as the story progresses. In the throne room they call people to worship. They then announce and narrate the opening of the seven seals (*Revelation* 6). Later they deliver the golden bowls full of the wrath of God to the seven angels (*15:7*). They are last mentioned near the end of the book, worshiping God when the White Horse appears (*19:4*). In the court of heaven the One on the throne does not speak until the end of the book (*21:5*), and these creatures seem to speak for Him.

In Ezekiel the creatures are called *cherubim*, and the Writings tell us that this designation applies here as well. *Cherubim*, also called *seraphim*, are usually seen as angels with wings. They appear in many in places throughout the Word. They are the sentries to the Garden of Eden, they were depicted on the Ark of the Covenant and the walls of the temple, and they were in the court of heaven seen by Isaiah. Their role is always to protect what is holy, assisting those who approach the Lord in humility and reverence, and repelling others.

Their wings describe their power.

Their fearsome appearance is a depiction of what they do. The wings, whether two or six, describe their power:

“Wings symbolize powers because they are means

of rising upwards. Moreover, in the case of birds they take the place of arms in the human being, and arms symbolize powers.” *Apocalypse Revealed* 245

The creatures here and in Ezekiel are said to be “full of eyes, around and within”, depicting the Lord’s Providence, foresight and wisdom (*Apocalypse Revealed* 246; *Apocalypse Explained* 284).

The meaning of the types of animals that are named, as they are explained in *Apocalypse Revealed*, are what really begin to show what they do and how these creatures work in our lives. We read:

“Since wings symbolize powers, and each living creature had had six wings, it is apparent from what we said above (about the meaning of each animal) what kind of power is symbolized by each one’s wings. The wings of the lion symbolize the power of combating evils and falsities arising from hell, this being the power of the Lord’s Divine truth from the Word. The wings of the calf symbolize the power to affect hearts, for the Divine truth of the Word affects people who read it reverently. The six wings of the human being symbolize the power to perceive the nature of God and what pertains to God, as this is peculiarly the mark of a human being in reading the Word. And the wings of the eagle symbolize the power to recognize truth and good, and to acquire intelligence for oneself.” *Apocalypse Revealed* 245

Here we begin to see how these beasts protect what they protect. They are about the promotion of certain qualities - qualities that bring us into the Lord’s presence. Without these qualities we can’t get near Him.

The creatures are not actually protecting the Lord, they are protecting us. The power of the Lord’s love and wisdom is so great that no one could withstand its direct presence. Not that love and wisdom cause harm in themselves, but everything in a person that is inconsistent with them reacts to their presence, and the greater the love and wisdom the more violent the reaction is (*Arcana Coelestia* 2410; *True Christian Religion* 688). The Lord’s presence with



every person must therefore always be modified and accommodated to prevent this reaction, just as people, animals and plants in this world are protected in various ways from the powerful rays of the sun. Without the sun there would be no life on earth. But exposure to it without the protection of distance, the atmosphere, and coverings would be deadly. In the same way, even though every person is completely dependent on the Lord for their very life, everyone is also interiorly insulated from anything about His presence that is inconsistent with their free choices. People can therefore think and will as they please, even if it directly opposes the Lord's wishes, with no apparent discomfort or ill effects. We are protected by the four living creatures. They protect our freedom.

These creatures are the Word.

In our lesson, Swedenborg says: *"I know people will be surprised at my saying the four living creatures symbolize the Word."*

This would seem to be an unexpected meaning for these beasts, and people do not usually think of the Word of God as a form of protection from His power. But in many ways the Word is like the atmosphere that protects us from the sun. Just as the sun can shine more brightly or more dimly because of clouds, the Lord's love and wisdom can appear more clearly or more obscurely in the pages of His Word.

The remarkable thing about the Word as a form of connection with the Lord is that its value and utility is completely up to the reader. We are told that *"everyone who reads the Word is enlightened according to his end and affection"* (Arcana Coelestia 3436). That is:

"No genuine truth is seen or found in the Word by anyone whose objective is to become great and obtain honors in the world, and also in heaven, or whose objective is wealth and material gain in the world, or whose objective is a reputation for learning." De Verbo 9

"Every person who possesses a spiritual affection for truth, that is, who loves real truth because it is true, is enlightened by the Lord when they read the Word." De Verbo 12



This feature of the Word is described in many places in the Heavenly Doctrine, and it is the power that is meant by the protection of the four living creatures. No one enters the Lord's house without passing through them.

1. **The lion** means that you can only understand the Word and come into the Lord's presence by using its power to combat evils and falsities.
2. **The calf** means that you will only understand the Word if you allow it to affect your heart, for the Divine truth of the Word only affects people who read it with genuine interest or reverence.
3. **The human being** is about the desire to perceive the nature of God and what pertains to

God, as this is peculiarly the mark of a human being in reading the Word.

4. **The eagle** means that you will only understand the Word and come into the Lord's presence if you recognize truth and good and use them to become intelligent.

These are the magic keys that open the door to the Lord's house. But the truth is that they are really the guards to our freedom to think and act from our own heart and mind. Everyone is free to read or not read the Word, to form their own

beliefs and opinions about what it teaches, and to obey or disobey its precepts. The Lord's power is not a power that harms or hates anyone. All of us can decide for ourselves whether it is really true that happiness and peace come solely from Him.

May the guards to the Lord's throne remind all of us of the Lord's invitation to come into His house and lift up our hearts to Him in sincerity and love. They open the gates of the New Jerusalem to everyone who wishes to enter it. As we read at the end of the book:

"Blessed are those who do His commandments, that their power may be in the tree of life, and they may enter through the gates into the city." Revelation 22:14

AMEN

Readings from the Word

Ezekiel 1:

When I looked, and behold, a whirlwind was coming out of the north, a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself; and brightness *was* all around it and radiating out of its midst like the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire. ⁵ Also from within it *came* the likeness of four living creatures. And this *was* their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. ⁶ Each one had four faces, and each one had four wings. ⁷ Their legs *were* straight, and the soles of their feet *were* like the soles of calves' feet. They sparkled like the color of burnished bronze. ⁸ The hands of a man *were* under their wings on their four sides; and each of the four had faces and wings. ⁹ Their wings touched one another. *The creatures* did not turn when they went, but each one went straight forward.

¹⁰ As for the likeness of their faces, *each* had the face of a man; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right side, each of the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and each of the four had the face of an eagle. ¹¹ Thus *were* their faces. Their wings stretched upward; two *wings* of each one touched one another, and two covered their bodies. ¹² And each one went straight forward; they went wherever the spirit wanted to go, and they did not turn when they went.

Revelation 4:

After these things I looked, and behold, a door *standing* open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard *was* like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, "Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this."

² Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne. ³ And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and *there was* a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne *were* twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. ⁵ And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire *were* burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. ⁶ Before the throne *there was* a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, *were* four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.

The first living creature *was* like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature *was* like a flying eagle. ⁸ *The* four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!"

Apocalypse Revealed 239:

The four living creatures symbolize the Word of the Lord from the first of it in its lasts, and its protections. I know people will be surprised at my saying the four living creatures symbolize the Word. This is nevertheless their symbolic meaning. The four living creatures here are the same as the cherubim in Ezekiel... and they were, as here, a lion, an ox, a human being, and an eagle... They were seen "*in the midst of the throne and around the throne.*" The Lord was in the midst of the throne, and because the Lord embodies the Word, it could not appear anywhere else. They were also seen around the throne, because they were seen in the angelic heaven, where the Word exists also. The fact that *cherubim* symbolize the Word and its protection... is because the literal sense of the Word is a protection for the genuine truths that lie within. The protection consists in the fact that the literal sense can be turned this way or that, or explained in accordance with one's comprehension, yet without harming or violating the Word's inner meaning. For it does no harm for the literal sense to be interpreted differently by different people. But harm is done if the Divine truths that lie within are perverted, for this does violence to the Word.



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