

A Worthy Occupation

Purpose

To affirm that the central aim of worship is the praise of God



The Scripture for this lesson is Revelation 4.

Listen

1 After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

2 At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!

3 And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.

4 Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.

5 Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God;

6 and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind:

7 the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.

8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come."

9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever,

10 the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

Key Verse: *You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. (Revelation 4:11)*

Look

Albert Camus, the French novelist, playwright, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1957), wrestled with philosophical and religious questions all his life. Although he was drawn to Christianity, to my knowledge he never became a believer. I am deeply moved by something Camus said about our Lord, however: "He simply wanted to be loved, nothing more. Of course, there are those who love him, even among Christians. But they are not numerous."¹

Some might hear this as the kind of veiled attack on Christians that sometimes characterizes unbelievers. Yet I am stung by it, for in many ways it is true. As one who has attended worship services since I was in my mother's womb and who has participated as usher, choir member, vocal soloist, liturgist, and preacher (for more than sixty years), I often repent at what a poor worshiper I have been.

Please do not think me unkind or judgmental when I observe that, as a pastor and as a guest preacher, I have wondered how so many good church members can remain part of worshiping bodies that exhibit so little gladness, excitement, or even reverence.

If there is any dominating theme in the Book of Revelation, it is worship. I approach the study with you driven by a hunger to know more about our God and to do better in the adoration I offer him.

Live

Before the Throne of God

The first chapter of Revelation offers a tantalizing introduction to Christ, and the second and third chapters give us his messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor. With Chapter 4, we find ourselves standing before the throne of God Almighty. Many who are drawn to the book are glad to hear, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (Revelation 4:1). We love to explore what we think is the future, and that sentence promises to start us on a grand trip. But the writer will not let us get in too big a hurry. First there is our worship to offer.

We need to pay attention to this. We cannot do justice to this wonderful Book of Revelation unless we approach it with hearts that worship God. More than that, I do not think we can get a feeling for that other great book, life itself, except from the posture of worship. Life is too big to grasp simply through our intellects or our research. Since life comes from God, we grasp it best when we are nearest the source: God. Unless worship is at work in our souls, our lives will slip into either arrogance on the one hand or despair on the other.

In our Bible Lesson the setting for worship is a throne. We are not told that it is the throne of God, but we quickly realize as much. This reminds us of an issue we dealt with in an earlier lesson, that in our worship we speak of God as an absolute ruler, yet we do not necessarily live as if this is so.

In one of my books I describe our relationship to God as the ultimate friendship and God as my dearest Friend. When I pray at home, I often think of God as being in the next chair, the Friend with whom I converse; sometimes when walking, I talk with God as if we were walking together—as indeed we are. But at some point I always need to remember that any intimacy I enjoy in this relationship is a gift of grace. God rules. The throne belongs to God.

The writer of Revelation resorts to exotic language to describe this throne. “Around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald” (Revelation 4:3). For us who know the story of God’s covenant in Genesis 9:8-17, that is a telling backdrop! “In front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal” (4:5-6a). For lighting and sound (for those who enjoy theatrical effects), “coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder” (4:5). Take a very, very deep breath before you approach this King.

Now is an excellent time to offer to God your worship.

Two Groups of Worshipers

Two bodies of worshipers are present at this extraordinary moment. First, “around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads” (Revelation 4:4). The number twelve (and its multiples) is a common theme throughout the Book of Revelation. The twenty-four elders represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. They symbolize the people of God throughout history, reminding us that before God, Israel and church are one people. Through them the purposes of God are being fulfilled on our planet. And, in due time, Israel and church will worship God together, rejoicing that God’s will is at last complete.

The white robes symbolize purity. Many qualities ought to mark the people of God, but those qualities should add up to holiness. When we speak of love, joy, peace, patience, and the other fruit of the Christian life, we are describing the grand umbrella of holiness. When we realize that purity of life will be our identifying characteristic in eternity, we surely ought to feel compelled to seek such purity here. Most of us have discovered that this is not easy. The tug of everyday life seems opposite to the virtues I have listed; but the goal of such purity is not only worth our seeking, it is our divine obligation. Our Lord has called us to this destination, a wardrobe of purity; so we must commit ourselves daily to reach such a standard.

The second group at the throne of God is made up of “four living creatures” that are like a lion, an ox, a human, and an eagle (Revelation 4:6b-7). This scene reminds us of Ezekiel’s vision, as recorded in Ezekiel 1:4-14. For me these creatures represent the whole of creation; they are now in the presence of God, joining in worship. The Scriptures teach that with humankind’s sin, nature itself fell out of joint with God’s purposes. Now, in the Revelation scene, nature is restored and joins in holy praise. One thinks of a line from an honored hymn that is based on this Scripture passage: “All thy works shall praise thy name, /in earth and sky and sea.”²

What hymns or lines of hymns come to your mind as you read this portion of Scripture?

Worship Comes Easy

In a sense, nothing is more natural to us humans than the act of worship. Wherever one goes on this planet, people worship. The motivation may range from fear and superstition on the one hand to purity and adoration on the other, but we want to worship. If we do not find a worthy object, we will settle on an unworthy one (including ourselves or our possessions).

The language of worship also comes naturally. Few things are more to the point and more authentic than the prayer of a small child. But the more one loves God, the more one seeks for beauty of language to express that love. See then this heavenly scene: "Day and night without ceasing they sing,

*'Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come'" (Revelation 4:8b).*

In terms of length of words, the language is wonderfully simple, with only one word of more than four letters. The emphasis is on the holiness of God and God's eternal nature. Both of these qualities seem utterly different from us, hemmed in as we are by our failings (sin) and the actuarial tables (death). Yet, here also is the promise of God on our behalf: By God's grace we are destined to be holy (See 1 Thessalonians 4:3.). In addition, the breath of God invested in us at our creation equips us to be eternal creatures, a potential that is fulfilled in the birth from above (John 3:1-16). The second part of the hymn in Revelation 4 continues:

*You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created. (Revelation 4:11)*

The dictionary reminds us that our word worship comes from the Old English word *worthscipe*; that is, that which is worthy of our attention. When the song says, "You are worthy" (Revelation 4:11), it underlines the rightness of our worship: We have found the One who is worthy of such adulation, so reverently and gladly we offer it. The language of this portion of the song also emphasizes that we are creatures and God is the Creator. This puts our worship in a fascinating light. Logically, we would think that that which is created can do nothing else than praise the One who has created it; after all, can the painting, the symphony, the automobile, or the dessert do anything other than give credit to the one who made it? But you and I—created creatures—can choose not to give credit to our Creator. God allows us the extraordinary freedom to choose whether we will worship the One who has made us. In the eternal scene, however, arrogance will be no more; we will gladly give "glory and honor and power" to the One who has "created all things" (4:11).

What hymn best expresses your adoration of God?

Becoming What We Worship

It is hard to imagine an era (other than our own) when people poured their adulation so feverishly and so indiscriminately on such a variety of objects. Perhaps it is because we have more objects than any other generation, or perhaps it is because we have the time and money to indulge ourselves more freely. I am worried about what this adulation says about us. What people worship—things, money, fun,

sex, food, or God—indicates what kind of people they will become. The psalmist said that people had idols with mouths that did not speak and ears that did not hear (Psalm 115:4-6). He then added, “Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them” (115:8). We become like what we worship.

So it matters greatly that the God we worship is holy and worthy. I am glad, too, that God is almighty, the Creator of all things; this assures me that my trust is well placed. It is interesting that the four living creatures “are full of eyes all around and inside” (Revelation 4:8). These creatures, in other words, are all-discerning. They are not fooled. They recognize reality—or the lack thereof—and with such recognition they worship God without ceasing.

I have been a worshiper for more years than I can quickly calculate. I know literally hundreds of hymns by heart. When someone reads the Scripture lesson, I often can quote it fairly accurately as they read. I have begun every day with prayer for many decades. Yet I wish I were a better worshiper. I wish I were more adequate in expressing my love for God.

We become better worshipers as we understand more fully the nature and goodness of God, and we come to that knowledge by spending more time in the presence of God. There is no bargain-counter formula, no quick-fix spirituality. If God merits the unceasing worship of the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures (that is, the people of God through the centuries and the whole of creation), then true worship is our worthiest occupation, too.

When have you worshiped God best?

1 From The Fall, by Albert Camus; quoted in The Harper Religious & Inspirational Quotation Companion, by Margaret Pepper (Harper & Row, 1989); page 454. 2From “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty,” by Reginald Heber, in The United Methodist Hymnal (Copyright © 1989 by The United Methodist Publishing House); 64.

Help us, O God, to worship you this day in ways that are worthy of eternity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.