

Worship on Earth as It Is in Heaven

Revelation 4 & 5

Introduction – The Last Lap

I've never been much of an athlete. I took my turn my turn at freshman football when I only weighed 96 pounds. I did letter in springboard diving. But I developed too late to really ever compete in organized sports, so it wasn't a big part of my growing-up experience. I did endure physical challenges, however. I went backpacking, and like everyone else, I had to take physical education classes where the teacher would make you take a lap for every little infraction. "Take a lap, Myers!" It was very easy consequence to dish out to uncooperative teenagers.

What I found, in my limited experience, was how important it was to finish well. Runners "hit the wall." Swimmers have a similar experience. Backpackers are tempted to give up before they reach the top of the mountain pass. You've got to finish well. Even the Apostle Paul used athletics as a metaphor when he came to the end of his life. "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the course."

Well, we are near the finish line in our worship series. Today is the last message. I hope that you have found it stimulating – that you have learned something. I know for most, there has been some challenge. Maybe you've felt in the last two weeks that you've just about "hit the wall." (You know, they have been challenging messages.) Today, we run that last lap. Though there is a good deal to digest and learn today, I think you will find today to be refreshing and inspirational. Like the miler coming up on the last two hundred yards, let's engage our "kick" and finish well.

Scripture – Revelation 4 & 5

Introduction to the Book of Revelation – it is the unveiling of Christ's glory.

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! 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." At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third

living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

“Worthy are you, 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.”

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Observations:

What we observe in this passage is not something that will happen in the future. What John was experiencing was the drama of heavenly worship in real time. Some of the songs in our tradition even allude to that idea: *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name* “O that with yonder sacred throng we at His feet may fall...”, *Thou Art Worthy* directly quotes one of the songs of the passage. Contemporary songs have captured this idea. One of the most popular worship leaders with college students, David Crowder, has written, “Turn your ear to heaven and hear the noise inside, the sound of the angel’s awe, the sound of the angel’s song ...” Chris Tomlin reflected the actions of the elders when he wrote, “We fall down, we lay our crowns at the feet of Jesus...” Not many people know a lot about the Eastern Orthodox Church. They are not very good at evangelizing and their liturgy seems to be very mysterious. But I appreciate some of their understanding about worship. The Orthodox believe that they literally enter into the heavenly drama of Revelation 4 & 5 when they come together in corporate worship. The symbolism of their worship space with their icons, adornments, and furniture are all intended to represent the heavenly picture that we have just read. I find that idea to be compelling. It’s what Crowder was after when he wrote his song, *O Praise Him*.

If we carefully look at the drama of worship in Revelation, we can observe several things:

We observe, first of all, that worship in heaven is constant – day and night. This is encouraging for us as we consider, as we did in our first message, how we might pour out our lives as a constant outpouring of worship. We were made to worship and with all that we do, think, and say we can join with the heavenly host as they never cease to worship God.

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

*“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!” (4:8)*

Secondly, worship is focused on God's character and His acts. Several years ago, there was a popular song that expressed the idea that we worship God for who he is and not for what he's done for us. I understand the sentiment: that worship is not for our benefit. But the biblical truth is that God and his works are inseparable. His works are a perfect expression of who he is. In worship, we “do God's story.” That includes the celebration of his character as well as his mighty works.

*“You are worthy, O Lord our God,
to receive glory and honor and power.
For you created all things,
and they exist because you created what you pleased.” (4:11)*

We also see that worship in heaven is expressed through bodily posture. The challenge that we observed from David who danced without reserve in worship to God is reinforced in heavenly worship. And their action is no less extravagant and the elders prostrate themselves before the Almighty.

...the twenty-four elders fall down and worship the one sitting on the throne (the one who lives forever and ever). And they lay their crowns before the throne... (4:10)

Worship in heaven involves self-oblation. That's a big word; it means self-sacrifice. The elders laid their crowns – the glories they had earned – at the feet of the Lord. Worship always involves sacrifice.

In the beginning of chapter five, we observe John weeping bitterly. Great emotion is expressed in worship in heaven. When we worship “in spirit,” as we considered in our third message, we come openly and honestly. We don't hold back. Our lives are laid open in God's presence. Often, our encounter with God will spark intense emotions. Let them flow freely! It was Tozer who said, “Worship is to *feel* in one's heart.”

*Then I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll and read it.
(5:4)*

In the same verse we also observe that heavenly worship involves an acknowledged need for a Redeemer/a Savior. Christian worship is always centered on Christ or it isn't Christian. In this sense, the gospel is always proclaimed in worship.

In answer to the need for a Savior, worship in heaven is focused on the Lamb and the One who sits on the throne. It is Christo-centric.

And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

*“Blessing and honor and glory and power
belong to the one sitting on the throne
and to the Lamb forever and ever.” (5:13)*

In the same way, worship in heaven has a redemptive theme.

*For you were slain, and your blood has ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation. (5:5)*

(I hope the deacons are ready for this next one.) Worship involves singing. Everyone should sing. It’s really not optional. God doesn’t care if you can’t carry a tune. The question is not “do you have a voice,” but rather, “do you have a song.” All Christians have a song.

And they sang a new song with these words: (5:9)

Near the end the Revelation when Christ has defeated his foes, we observe that worship is unanimous. I’ll say more about this in a moment.

Then I heard again what sounded like the shout of a vast crowd or the roar of mighty ocean waves or the crash of loud thunder:

*“Praise the LORD!
For the Lord our God^l the Almighty, reigns. (19:6)*

In the same way, all creation joins in with the redeemed in worship.

*And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea.
(5:13)*

Finally, (and this is critical for us), there is a progression in worship. It flows from the throne, through the four living creatures to the twenty four elders, to the angels and all creation. This is instructive. There are worship leaders and they are not necessarily those on the platform or with musical instruments. For us, and every church, the primary worship leaders of the church are those who are the leaders in other things. For thirty years I may have held the title of “worship pastor.” But I wasn’t the primary worship leader. The people followed the pastor. I could never lead them beyond the public worship life of the lead pastor. I once left a church position after

four years because the preaching pastor would only come into the room when it was time for him to preach. The worship life of that church would forever be extremely limited. In our setting, the worship leaders include, especially, the deacons who are the truly the spiritual leaders of this church. So deacons, and other spiritual leaders, you cannot approach worship without conviction and the understanding that other people are watching you for cues as to how they should worship. They are watching you. And that is appropriate. It is part of the burden and privilege of the leadership mantle that you carry.

Summary:

This passage is not just an interesting picture to analyze; it a drama that we can enter into each time we gather for corporate worship. Let that idea sink in for a moment. We can enter into the very drama of worship that we have observed in the Book of Revelation. Jesus taught us to pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” That is God’s kingdom agenda for the church: to bring in and experience the kingdom of God. But it is a bit overwhelming if we consider all the observations that we have made. Let’s focus it down into to some important summary conclusions and consider how God may speak to us through this word this morning.

1. Worship in heaven is focused on God.

- It is focused on His character as His creatures give Him "honor, and glory, and blessing."
- Worship is focused on what God has done. "For You have created all things...for you overcame..."
- Worship is focused on Jesus. Without redemption, there would be not people of God. The central theme and story of Scripture is redemption. The Lamb of God is celebrated as the focal point of worship. The book of Revelation is the unveiling of the glory of Jesus.
- Worship is initiated by God. In fact, God is the subject and the object of worship. When we limit God to being just the recipient of our praise, then worship becomes dependent on me – on my emotional state and how well I was able to enter into it. Obviously, from Revelation, that is not the case. I like how Robert Webber puts it, “worship does the God’s story.” As worshippers, we enter into His narrative.

2. Worship in heaven is unanimous.

- There is no rebellion or unbowed heart in heaven. All creatures, whether the four mysterious beings around the throne, the twenty-four elders, the angel hosts, or the multitude without number...all worship the Lord. When we come together, we should really come together as one. The power of corporate worship is the unified voice of the people. When you come on Sunday morning, come to engage. Your participation is either an encouragement or a impediment to others in their worship. Corporate worship is a “team sport.”

3. Worship in heaven is varied.

- There are declarations, shouts, singing, falling down, great emotion, overwhelming sights and sounds in the book of Revelation. God's creation is varied and everything on the earth, over the earth, and under the earth will give God praise. God receives praise from acapella choirs and organs as well as from drums and guitars.

A Vision of a Worshipping People

For nearly two months we have been focusing on worship in our weekly sermons. During that time, we have been reminded that we need to be biblical learners, serving one another. The ground that we've covered, including today, brings a deep challenge to us, if we are willing to accept it. This is our last message on worship. We have come near the finish line.

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of Florence Chadwick, a long-distance swimmer who was determined to swim the twenty-seven mile channel between Long Beach, CA and Catalina Island. She had already distinguished herself as the first woman to swim the English Channel.

The July morning that she set out to swim the channel in 1952 was very foggy. Visibility across the water was less than a mile. During her swim to span the cold channel, sharks had to be driven away several times. Goaded on by her family and supporters they kept calling out to her, "You can do it, you can do it!" But after fifteen hours of physical ordeal, the island was still not in sight. Exhausted, she took her last stroke.

She quit.

Unknown to her and her support team, she had swam twenty six and a half miles. But with the heavy fog, they could not see the outline of Catalina Island, less than a thousand yards away.

Together, we have gone the 26 ½ miles through this worship series. Our finish will not be today, but rather as we reflect on what we've heard, digest it and let it change our life together.

I have a vision for First Baptist and that is that we will be a people who are marked by our worship. And by that, I don't mean "music." My desire and my work is that each of us would understand and experience a life-style of unceasing worship. Worship in your life, as it is in heaven. And then together, as we gather, that we will engage with God in worship in the same way the heavenly host do, with all of the elements that we have unpacked this morning. **Let First Baptist Church be known as a people who worship God "on earth as it is in heaven!"**

Prayer:

Holy Father, we come to you at your beckoning. Holy Spirit, pierce our hearts and minds and show us where we have failed and what we can become. We are your people, saved and redeemed by the Lamb of God. We desire to be pleasing to you in all that we do as individuals and as your church that we might fulfill your mission to make your Name known throughout the world. Grant us repentance. Grant us wisdom. Grant us vision for what we might become as a people who pour out our lives to you in concert with the heavenly masses who do not cease to praise you day and night as the thrice holy Lord God, Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come. In the name of Jesus, who with the Holy Spirit lives and reigns with you forever. Amen.