

“Worship In God’s Presence”
Revelation 4:1-11

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Scripture: Revelation 4:1-11

Sermon:

Introduction...

[pic automatic] Have you ever been to a Christian conference or other even where the worship was really awesome? Where you really felt the presence of the Spirit? I know I’ve been to a number. I remember my first youth rally when I was probably in grade 9. That was a first for me. Years later, when I went to the InterVarsity missions conference Urbana it was a similar experience of powerful times of worship.

When you got back from that event, did you ever think to yourself, “If only we could sing those songs at church we’d have a similar experience?” or “If only we used that style of music at our church it would be the same?” I know I certainly felt that way, growing up in a church that had traditional hymns played on a giant pipe organ and a full choir. That was very different than the drums, guitar and bass at my first youth conference.

It’s a reasonable thought to have- to think that the style of music is what caused you to have such a great experience of the presence of the Spirit of God. But actually, it is a wrong conclusion to come to. Jesus promised that **wherever two or three are gathered in his name his Spirit would be present.** (Matthew 18:20) So as long as even just 2 or 3 people show up to church in Jesus’ name, meaning that they are there in keeping with his character, his nature, then the Holy Spirit is present. So why is it that we don’t always have a powerful sense of his presence? Why is it that sometimes we feel the Spirit moving more?

Let me reassure you that it is not based on the style of music or the choice of songs! That kind of thinking reflects a false assumption. That false assumption is that somehow what we do can make God show up, that our music makes God “show up more” or show up in a more powerful way. That kind of thinking rests on the foundational belief, help consciously or unconsciously that worship is something we do in order to get God to move, act or show up. It assumes that God responds to our worship and that if our worship is “better” or “more pleasing to God” he will be moved to demonstrate his presence or his power more.

But that is a false foundation! That is a false belief about worship! In fact, it is a very pagan belief about worship. If you’re familiar with your OT, when Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal and Ashera on Mount Carmel, the pagan prophets spend most of the day crying out to their gods, screaming, dancing and even cutting themselves trying to get their gods to show up. (1 Kings 18:25-29) It doesn’t work. Elijah even begins to mock them, suggesting their gods have fallen asleep, are away on a journey or, perhaps, are even using the bathroom! It is a pagan belief that our worship, our activity, is what makes God show up in power.

Christian worship is, in fact, the exact opposite. **Worship is not our act for God to witness, but our witness to God’s acts.** Do you see the difference? Worship is not something we do to show off for God, to impress God, to appease God, to get his attention, make him act or even show up. That puts our activity first. That makes our activity the cause, the engine, or, in a more primitive sense, the horse. [pic] It makes God’s activity a response to our worship, a result, the car that moves or the cart that gets pulled. And that, frankly, is backwards.

In reality, our worship should be the cart drawn by the horse, the car being driven by the engine, the effect caused by God. What do I mean by that? **Worship is our response to what God has done.** It is our reaction to God’s action, our reaction to his character and nature. Worship is the result of thinking about God, who he is and what he has done. We talked about this repeatedly throughout Advent. Our worship, our response to God, can take many forms, such as investigating what God has done, submitting ourselves to God, telling others what God has done, giving costly offerings to God in addition to praising him and singing or making music.

So what, then, is the problem when we go to church and it is a dry experience? Why is it that worship is not always a powerful experience of the Spirit? Why is that so rare? Although choosing music poorly, or poor performance may hinder worship by becoming a distraction, picking the “right” songs and playing them the “right” way is not what causes us to have a powerful worship experience. When we find that powerful worship experiences are the exception, the problem is usually not in the music played, but the mindset we bring. How

often is our attitude at church one of wonder about the nature of God? How often do we come to church thinking about what God has done for us?

Isn't it more likely that we come to church thinking, "I wonder what I will get out church this week?" Or "I hope we sing my favourite songs!" Or "I hope we don't sing those other songs," Or "I really need a pick me up this week," Or "Oh, bother, I have to go to church again!"

One of the reasons events like conferences have such powerful worship experiences for people is that the people who come are looking for God, they're setting aside time for God, they are coming with open hearts and open minds, they are setting aside a day or more just for God. And that change of attitude opens them up to the work of the Spirit who is already present! That change of heart means they are in a better place to respond to God, his character and what he has done. And so their worship is more pure, more focussed on God and more powerful.

Context

Today we are beginning a short series on worship examining these very things. Our first two weeks, beginning today, will be spent examining Revelation 4 and 5, one long passage about the worship that happens in Heaven in the presence of God around his throne.

Revelation is a book that baffles many Christians. Some Christians approach it too woodenly. Others avoid it all together. Often, those in the second group are avoiding it because of what the first group does with it! **But if you know your OT, the book of Revelation isn't so bad.** If you don't know your OT, having a good commentary makes a big difference!

Revelation is a special type of literature called "Apocalyptic." Now, often people hear the word "apocalypse" and think "the end of the world!" But that's not accurate. **An apocalypse means a tear in the veil between heaven and earth.** So when someone looks through that tear and sees what is happening in the heavenly realm, and writes down what they see, they are writing apocalyptic literature. Ezekiel, Daniel and Isaiah in the OT all contain portions of apocalyptic writing. In Acts, when Stephen is killed by the crowd, he has an apocalyptic vision before he dies. He says he sees Heaven opened and Jesus is at the right hand of the throne of God. That is an apocalyptic vision.

The book of Revelation is a series of such visions that John had which he then recorded. Apocalyptic literature was also used a lot during the times between the writing of the Old and New Testaments. The Jewish people were under occupation by foreign armies. They were being oppressed. **They wrote apocalyptic books talking about the fall of "Babylon" but they really meant the fall of Rome.** They would get in trouble for writing about the fall of Rome, but the Romans didn't care if they wrote about the fall of Babylon. So there are certain common techniques in apocalyptic writing that John uses in Revelation. Again, John is writing to Christians, now, under persecution. So the same rules applied about writing things against Babylon, but really meaning Rome.

[pic] In school, our English curriculum required that we read *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell. That book is an allegory about communism in the Soviet Union. But it is a story about cows and pigs and horses. Orwell used the technique of writing about a farm in order to convey a deeper message about history. In the same way, apocalyptic writers use their genre of writing to actually talk about deeper meanings in the world, both the physical earthly world and the spiritual world.

Our passage today, the throne room scene of Chapter 4, is strongly influenced by a similar passage in Ezekiel. On the one hand, John was surely influenced by Ezekiel's language. On the other hand, they were both writing about the same thing, God's throne room, so it makes sense that their passages would be similar. And remember, both men are trying to put into words a spectacular visual experience! Sometimes you can tell that they are struggling to find words to describe the splendour of what they are seeing.

Text

Let's read together Revelation 4:1-11.

What it Says

Wow, what a lot going on! There are some pretty bizarre images in this passage- creatures with animal heads, eyes everywhere and wings. There's thunder and lightning, rainbows made of jewels, elders and crowns and singing. How do we make sense of all this?

Let me walk us through some of the imagery before we get to the heart of the passage's meaning. First, notice verse 1. Two things here: John says "after this I looked..." This marks a new vision. Chapters 1-3 form a vision together. Chapter 4 begins a new vision that lasts until chapter 9. Chapter 10 marks yet another vision, as does chapter 11:13. In the big picture, reading Revelation, we need to keep track of the different visions. Why? Because the visions may overlap in the events they describe. They may be out of order when it comes to the events they describe! [GK Beale, *Revelation*, p. 317]

Think of the Star Wars movies. Episode 8 is out in the theatres right now. But the first movie, Star Wars, released in 1977, is not the first chronologically. It's actually the 4th movie. Episode 1 wasn't released until 1999. If you only watched the movies in the order they came out, without understanding that the second set of 3 were prequels, you'd be terribly confused! In the same way, John's visions are recorded in the order he had the visions, not necessarily the order of events in the visions. We have to be careful trying to use the book of Revelation as a road map to the future!

[pic] Next, John looked and saw a door standing open in heaven. This is the apocalypse. This is the tear or doorway in the veil between heaven and earth. This is John's way of telling us that he is describing things happening in the spiritual realm, not the earthly realm.

What does he see? The first thing he describes is a throne with someone seated on it. He doesn't try to describe the one on the throne in detail other than to say he had the appearance of precious stones jasper and carnelian. Around the throne was a rainbow that looked like emerald. Jasper, carnelian and emerald were three precious stones frequently found together in the OT and classical literature. [George Ladd, *Revelation*, p. 73] (see Ex 28:17-20; Ezek 9:2; 10:1; 28:13) We don't need to try to assign meaning to each stone, but together "they represent God's sovereignty, majesty and glory." [Beale, p. 320]

You can tell as John writes that he is straining to find words to describe the majesty of what he sees. But putting aside the precious stones, notice that the first thing John sees around God is a rainbow. What is the significance of that? Well, where do we first read about a rainbow in the Bible? The story of Noah! Back in Genesis 9:13-14 God puts a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his covenant with Noah never to destroy the world with a flood again. So in our context, **the first thing John sees around God is a rainbow- a sign of God's faithfulness and mercy.**

The next thing we see are 24 thrones surrounding the throne of God. On these thrones are 24 elders. The best explanation of these elders is that they are heavenly representatives of the 12 tribes of Israel under the Old Covenant and representatives of the 12 apostles of the New Covenant. [Beale, p. 322] They are not humans, numbered with those redeemed by Christ, since they are later described in distinction from the redeemed, but they are representative of the 12 tribes and 12 apostles. [Ladd, p. 75; Beale, p. 322]

From the throne come thunder and lightning. Remember, many of the images come from the OT. On Mt Sinai when God gave the law to Moses, there were peals of thunder and lightning on top of the mountain. There are 7 lamps before the throne representing the 7-fold Spirit of God. The number 7 represents holiness and completion in the Hebrew worldview. Zechariah 4:2-3, 10 speaks of 7 lamps representing the Spirit of Yahweh. So here we can conclude that the 7 lamps represent the Holy Spirit. [Ladd, p. 76; Beale, p. 326]

Moving out, in front of the throne is a sea of glass. This is a great image. In the cultures surrounding Israel, it was believed that the god of chaos lived in the sea, which explained why the sea could be so turbulent at times and why storms came from the sea. Baal, the pagan god, was called the storm rider, who came in from the sea. Even in Israel, the sea was considered the source of chaos and evil. In Daniel 7, a passage that has a strong influence on our passage, the sea is the dwelling place of evil. So here, **in the presence of God, all the sources of chaos are as still as glass.** [Beale, p. 327]

Around the throne are 4 creatures with different heads, with wings and with eyes all over them. The eyes represent knowledge and God's all-knowing nature. The heads represent the Hebrew categories of the animal kingdom. Today, we speak of the lion as the king of the jungle. In Israel, the lion was the chief of the wild animals. The ox was the chief of the domesticated animals. The eagle was the chief of the birds of the air. Last, but not least, is man, in a category by himself. So the four creatures represent all of the animal kingdom. **The four creatures represent all animated life on earth and they fulfil the purpose of all creatures- worshipping God.** [Beale, p. 332]

All day and night, these creatures worship God, singing his praises, that he is holy, that he was and is and is to come. In response to the worship of the 4 creatures, the 24 elders also worship God, getting off their thrones, falling down before God and laying their own crowns at his feet. In the ancient world, defeated kings would offer their crowns to the king who now ruled them as a sign of submission. As the elders submit to God, they also speak, saying God is worthy to receive glory, honour and power because he created all things.

This is a brief description of the imagery in this passage and where the images come from. If you want to see more, read Ezekiel 1-2 and Daniel 7, both of which have a strong influence on this passage.

What It Means

So what, then, does this passage mean? If we put together the meaning of the images, what do we get? The first thing we see is God's character. He is patient and merciful, as shown by the rainbow. We see that he calms chaos and overcomes evil. This is a reminder that **no matter how bad things seem to be on earth, we can trust that God is ultimately in control in the spiritual realm**. Remember, John was writing to Christians under persecution. Some were being executed for their faith. Since the beginning of human society, we have all wrestled with the problem of evil and why bad things happen to good people. So we can all find hope in this lesson. But for Christians who are being persecuted for their faithfulness to God, it is a particularly important message that we can trust that God is in control. The thunder and lightning that come from God's throne show up again later in Revelation as God's judgment on evil. So this is foreshadowing that God will bring justice for the oppressed and judgment on evil. Remember, the sea is as still as glass in God's presence!

Also, notice that God is in the centre of the scene. Everything is described in reference to the throne of God. All of the activity is centred on God. **The heavenly creatures find their significance in relation to their placement around the throne. [Beale, p. 320] God is their centre.** God is the centre of the heavenly realm. He is the source of significance and meaning for all the creatures in heaven. Similarly, all the inhabitants of earth will be judged based on their attitude and response to "God's claim to rule over them from his heavenly throne." [Beale, p. 320] We on earth also need to find our significance in relation to God. He needs to be the centre of our world as well as the heavenly one.

Next, we see that in God's presence, when confronted with the reality of God and his character, the natural response of all living creatures is to worship God. In the presence of God's holiness, where there is no sin, our intended nature comes out, our intended purpose comes out- to know God and to glorify him forever. That is why we were made. That is what our perfect representatives- the 24 elders- are doing, that's what the 4 creatures representing all animal life are doing. **We were created in order to respond to God's character and God's deeds in worship.**

Now, on earth, this side of Christ's return, we don't see God's nature perfectly. We don't know God perfectly. Then, when we are in God's presence, either after we die or after Christ's return and we face judgment, we will know God fully. When God's full nature has been revealed to us, we will all naturally fall down in submission to him, we will all worship for what he has done- that he has created us- and for his character. He is the eternal God, he is faithful, he stills the chaos, he brings judgment on evil and salvation to the faithful. All of this will cause us to respond in worship.

John's intent in writing this passage is that it be a model for our worship. [Beale, p. 312] He wants us, the church on earth, to respond to God the same way the creatures and elders do. He wants to remind us that although we don't see God perfectly now, we can know God and his nature. We have seen what God has done, at least to a certain extent. We know God is eternal and that he created us. We know he is faithful and merciful. These characteristics should be the basis of our worship. The character of God should be the foundation of our worship- our response to him.

One of the main purposes for the church gathering together for corporate worship "is to be reminded of [our] "heavenly existence and identity by modelling [our] worship on the angels' and heavenly creatures' worship of the exalted [God]." [Beale, p. 323] This is why we gather together on Sunday. This is why we worship God together. It is to remind us of what is happening in the heavenly realm. It is to encourage us to persevere. It is to strengthen us in times of trouble. It is to teach us and remind us of what God has done for us, of who he is.

Why It Matters

So why does this matter? So a bunch of creatures are worshipping God in heaven. What does that mean for

you and me?

We can learn an important lesson about worship from this passage. Notice that God does not issue thunder and lightning in response to the worship. That's there first. God doesn't still the sea in response to the elders laying down their crowns. They lay them down, in part, because the sea has already been stilled. The creatures praise God for his eternal nature. The elders praise God for creation. These are things that have already been completed. Their praise and worship is for what God has already done.

Our worship needs to be based on what God has already done and who he is in his eternal nature. This means we need to check our motives in worship. We need to check our mindset, our thoughts and desires when it comes to worship. **How do you prepare for church?** What are you thinking about when you come to church? Are you thinking about God, or something else? I know many of us come to church thinking about all the tasks we have to perform- teaching, playing, cleaning, serving, cooking, etc. Or maybe we're thinking about what we're going to be doing after church. We're already onto the next part of our day by the time we arrive. Or we're thinking about what we did on Saturday, or our conversation with somebody Sunday morning. How often are we thinking about God, what he has done and who he is?

What do you want from church when you come? Are you looking for an experience? Are you looking for an emotional boost? Are you looking for inspiration? I remember talking to a neighbour once about church. She grew up going to a liberal church where she didn't learn much about the gospel. She frankly admitted that she went to church when she was feeling down and wanted an emotional boost or pick-me-up. If she was feeling good during the week, she didn't go to church. She thought this was why everybody went to church! She didn't see anything wrong with this.

How many of us come to church with similar goals? How many of us come to church with a desire for our own betterment in some way? Maybe we want to learn something, or be inspired, or be reminded. Now all of these things can happen. Church should cause us to be inspired. It should be a source of spiritual and emotional strength. We talked about the reminder that God is in control even when things seem bad to us. But that should be the result of focussing on who God is. That should not be our primary goal or purpose in going to church! Why? Because these are all self-centred motives.

Our worship needs to be God-centred, not self-centred. We need to come to church thinking about God, what he has done and who he is to the best of our ability as he has revealed himself to us. That takes effort. Why? Because we are fallen creatures. We are naturally self-centred. We all battle sin that dwells in our hearts. And Satan desperately wants to make sure we don't give glory to God for who he is and what he has done. So we not only have to fight our own fallen nature, but we have to fight against the darts and arrows of the devil too! No wonder we rarely find church a powerful experience of the Spirit!

This passage in Revelation should change how we prepare ourselves for church. We often focus on what we have to do at church, or getting dressed up for church, who we're going to see at church. We need to shift to focus on God. We need to intentionally build time into our morning on Sunday, and even better our Saturday, to prepare ourselves to respond to who God is and what he has done. Maybe it means reading scripture. Maybe it means journaling. Maybe it means praying, asking God to remind you of who he is and what he has done in your life and in creation. Maybe it means getting to bed early- something I'm terrible at- just so you're not so tired when you get here. Maybe it means preparing things on Saturday afternoon so you're not frantically trying to get ready on Sunday morning. Maybe it means showing up 5 minutes earlier so we can chat with people before the service starts but still have time to focus ourselves on God, to settle our minds and not let the wonderful, loving relationships we have with people at church distract us from why we are here- to respond to who God is and what he has done!

I don't know what you need to do because I don't know what you go through on Sunday morning. **But ask yourself what you do to prepare for worship and, more importantly, what you do that interferes with your ability to worship!**

It also affects how we "do" church. As worship leaders, we need to help you focus on God. We need to work to remove distractions. We need to remember that worship is not about having an emotional experience, about using the music, atmosphere, prayer time etc. to create a mood or feeling in the congregation. We need to use the tools we have at our disposal to help us all focus on God, to remind us of who God is and what God has

done. That means doing things well so our mistakes or disorganization doesn't cause a distraction. It also means thinking about how we will turn people's minds and hearts away from the distractions of life towards the glory of God.

Finally, as you enter into worship, and as you depart from worship, and the troubles and difficulties of the world start to clamour for your attention, be reminded that God's throne is in the centre and the chaotic seas are as still as glass in his presence. God has already won. God is still in control. God is sovereign. So no matter what comes your way, know that God is either allowing it or guiding you through it so that you can learn about him and be shaped to be more like him.

Please pray with me, "Holy, holy, holy are you, Lord God Almighty, who was, and is and is to come. You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." Amen.