

# Worship in Revelation

## PART 1 • HOLY • REVELATION 4:1-8

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It is a blessing to be together for worship this morning! As usual, I hope all of you have the elements for the Lord's Supper, as John/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after we study together this morning. And then, Noah/John will be leading in several songs before we dismiss [for class].

As we get started today, we'd like to share a reminder that we have not shared in a while! Many of us give online or directly through our bank, but several weeks ago, the rest of you might have noticed that we transitioned from a basket to a drop-box on the wall right inside the front door; and it is easy to overlook, so, we thought we'd try a slide for a bit. Giving is a great joy, it is an act of worship, and it's definitely something we do not want to forget. We would continue to ask for your prayers so that the Lord's resources are handled with the utmost of accuracy and respect.

Before we get to our study of God's word today, we also want to make sure we offer an invitation. We would invite you to obey the gospel. The gospel is the good news concerning Jesus and his death, burial, and resurrection. We obey the gospel by believing it, by turning away from sin, by publicly confessing our belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed with the Lord in the act of baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. Several months ago, House to House/Heart to Heart had a great graphic, explaining what it means to obey the gospel. We asked their permission to share it, and they told us to go for it. Sometimes we appreciate seeing it illustrated like this. In baptism, we are (in a sense) re-enacting the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We have a similar illustration on the wall above our baptistery downstairs. If you have any questions, if you would like to study further, please pull me aside after worship today; or, get in touch with John or Aaron. Our contact information is always on the front of the bulletin each week (on the wall right inside the front door).

This morning, I would like for us to start a brief series of lessons where we focus on worship. And I'd like to do this by looking at a series of what might be described as "songs" in the book of Revelation. Some are specifically described as "songs," but others might be more accurately described as statements of praise. And all five of these are found in Revelation 4-5. We looked at the first three chapters of Revelation several months ago. We looked at John's vision of Jesus in Chapter 1, and then we studied a series of lessons based on the Lord's messages to the Seven Churches of Asia in Chapters 2-3. Unfortunately, many people seem to stop reading the book of Revelation after Chapter 3! And that's not good! We do, though, understand. If you have read the book

of Revelation, or if you have heard about it, then you might have the impression that it is a rather terrifying book. And it is. As the Lord reveals himself to John, he does in fact use some terrifying images. We have beasts, and dragons, and fire, and giant hailstones. We have war, and famine, and pestilence, and death, and there are times when all of this is a bit overwhelming.

Thankfully, though, Jesus does not start the book of Revelation with the scary stuff. But instead, after introducing himself, after giving these messages to the seven churches, the Lord seems to crack the door open a bit as he allows John to have at least a brief peek into heaven. And this is what we find in Revelation 4-5. The door opens, John is allowed to see and to hear what is happening in the spiritual world, and what he observes is worship – around the clock, for eternity. The door opens into God’s throne room, the throne is surrounded by strange and amazing creatures, and elders, and angels, and all of these beings are worshipping God continually.

Now, for some of us, we might be a bit concerned by that! We think about worshipping for an eternity, and it might be a strange picture for some of us. When I was a kid, I imagined heaven as a huge auditorium (like this one, only much, much larger). There were pews, upon pews, upon pews, and along the outside edges there were stalls, almost like what we might find in a bathroom – and we would use those stalls to change into our “church clothes.” I never figured out what we would change out of or into or what we would do before or after worship, but that was my picture of heaven. It was okay, but it might have been a bit boring, and you had to wear a very uncomfortable polyester suit. And I remember being ever so slightly concerned about the idea of doing this forever. That, though, is not what we have in Revelation 4-5.

But instead, these two chapters are full of praise. And I’m wondering: Why does the Lord start here? And as I study these two chapters, I’m starting to understand that this is what John needs to see and hear. He is in exile on the Roman prison island of Patmos, he is cut off from his Christian family, he is all alone, and what he needs is to know that the way things seem to be at the time is not the way things really are. As this book is first written (perhaps around 95 AD), the situation does not look good. Christians are being persecuted, Rome is brutalizing the Lord’s church, and so John, then, needs some encouragement. John needs to know what is truly going on behind the scenes. And that is what we see in these two chapters. The revelation, then, starts in the throne room – with God completely in control, with God being worshiped continually – not under compulsion, but because the natural reaction to being in the presence of God is worship.

And this is a message we need to hear. Things are still a bit weird right now, aren’t they? This world is not right. We have some suffering going on. The world is in turmoil. And like John, we need to know that God is still on his throne. This morning, then, let’s look at the first paragraph in Revelation 4. We are moving from “what’s wrong with the church” (in Chapters 2-3), and we are moving toward “what is right with God” (in Chapters 4-5). The picture on the wall, by the way, is of the Grand Tetons out in Wyoming, taken about two weeks ago. It’s not heaven, but it is beautiful. Nevertheless, in Revelation, the focus is now shifting from earth to heaven. We will get back to the picture in just a moment, but for now, let’s look together at Revelation 4:1-8,

***<sup>1</sup> After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.” <sup>2</sup> Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. <sup>3</sup> And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. <sup>4</sup> Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden***

***crowns on their heads. <sup>5</sup> Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; <sup>6</sup> and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. <sup>7</sup> The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. <sup>8</sup> And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME."***

As we look at this first example of worship in Revelation 4-5, I'd like to divide our thoughts into two basic categories, starting with what John SEES on this occasion (the setting, what is happening here, where he is on this occasion) and then we will move along to what John HEARS around the throne (the worship of the four living creatures down in verse 8).

#### **I. But we start with what he SEES on this occasion, the SETTING.**

It starts in verse 1, as John notices a ***"door standing open in heaven."*** And from John's point of view, he's imprisoned on an island. If I'm in prison, and if I see a door suddenly open in front of me, I plan on stepping through that door. And that's apparently what John does here. He explores a bit. He hears a voice, the voice of Jesus, the voice invites him to ***"Come up here,"*** and he does. He's suddenly ***"in the Spirit,"*** and he sees ***"a throne...standing in heaven,"*** and there is a being of some kind ***"sitting on the throne."*** And really, throughout this chapter and from this point forward throughout the book of Revelation, the focus is on the ***"throne."*** I believe the word ***"throne"*** is found 62 times in the New Testament, and 47 of those are found here in Revelation, with 12 of those right here in Chapter 4. And in this chapter, everything seems to revolve around the throne. We have a series of prepositions, ***"on the throne," "around the throne," "out from the throne," "before the throne,"*** and so on. Everything focuses on the throne. It is as if God's throne is the center of everything, the center of the Universe. I think about the bridge of a great ship. All decisions and all power are funneled through that one room. In practical terms, this passage is perhaps asking the question: Is God at the center of my life? Does everything in my life revolve around and point to him? Is his will being done in my life, as it is in heaven? Or am I at the center of my life?

One thing I find interesting is that we have no description of God himself. John doesn't describe an old man with a long beard. He's not posing with massive biceps and ripped abs. This isn't a Michelangelo painting. Nothing like that. But instead, we have 12 references to the ***"throne"*** in this chapter. It's as if the One on the throne is too magnificent and too terrifying to even describe, a bit like looking at the sun. We might think of what Paul writes to Timothy when he describes God in 1 Timothy 6:15-16 as, ***"...the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see."*** It's what the Psalmist describes in Psalm 104:1-2, when he says, ***"Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, You are very great; You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering Yourself with light as with a cloak, stretching out heaven like a tent curtain."*** What John sees here is on the verge of being indescribable. In verse 3, the One on the throne is compared to jasper and sardius (clear and red-colored precious stones). John then describes a ***"rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance."*** At first, when I read this, I thought, "Wow, God took the rainbow from Genesis 9 and put it around his throne." But then I realized, "No, in Genesis 9 God took the rainbow from around his throne and used it as a sign of his mercy and

grace, promising all of us that he would never flood the earth again.” In a sense, then, yes, God is terrifying, but this rainbow is a reminder of God’s love and patient endurance.

We then have a reference to twenty-four thrones surrounding God’s throne, and those on these other thrones are described as ***“elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns upon their heads.”*** These are human beings. We can’t be dogmatic about this, but we will see this imagery later with the number twelve representing the twelve patriarchs from the Old and the twelve apostles from the new. To me, it seems that these elders represent God’s people from all of human history. The word for ***“crowns”*** in this passage refers not to a “diadem,” the crown worn by a king or a ruler, but the word refers to the wreath of olive branches given to those who won the ancient games. These ***“golden crowns,”*** then, seem to be a reward of some kind. These men most likely represent those who have made it.

Back to the throne again (in verse 5), ***“Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder.”*** A terrifying scene. A terrifying experience. This is loud and bright. Something we would normally hide from. It’s similar to what the people could see coming from the top of Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:16, causing the people to tremble.

Beyond the thunder and lightning, we then have (also in verse 5) ***“seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God,”*** with seven being a number representing completeness. The word John uses here is not the word for a lamp like we might find in a house, but he uses the word for a “torch,” for a flame we might use to light up a large area at night. Some have compared these seven lamps to the seven descriptions of God’s Spirit found in Isaiah 11.

In verses 6-7, we have something John describes as ***“something like a sea of glass, like crystal.”*** I have no idea! In a sense, perhaps this is a picture of separation. Some have suggested, though, that this is the idea of the basin in the temple, where people would wash themselves before approaching God. So maybe, instead of a barrier, this is more of access point. We aren’t told.

We then have four creatures who are described as being ***“like”*** four of the most magnificent animals on this earth – like a lion, like a calf or an ox, like a man, and like an eagle. These four are at the top of their respective categories. The lion, of course, is the “king of the jungle,” as we sometimes say. The calf or the ox is the strongest of all domesticated livestock. The eagle is the most magnificent of all birds. And man, of course, rules over all of these. These are similar to the creatures seen by Ezekiel and by Isaiah. Here, they are ***“full of eyes in front and behind.”*** These creatures do not miss a thing. They can see in all directions, simultaneously. They represent the ultimate surveillance system. Even in most secure buildings, there are always blind spots. Not so with God. These creatures see everything, and with six wings each they can instantaneously move in all directions.

Before we move on from the scene here, I would just mention the lack of emphasis on John in this chapter. This isn’t about John; this is all about the One on the throne. Worship is not about us, but it is all about God. God is at the center of what is happening in Revelation 4. He is both the subject and the object of worship. Worship is about him, and worship is directed toward him. Everything in this chapter points to the throne and to the One who is on the throne. And what a great reminder and comfort for John! As he is imprisoned on the island of Patmos, the door to heaven cracks open, he is invited to come, and this is what he sees – God’s throne room.

## II. As we focus on verse 8, we now come to what John HEARS.

And we find that these four living creatures with perfect vision in all directions, they observe something about God on his throne, and so, ***“...day and night...do not cease to say, ‘HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME.’*** They observe, they notice that God is ***“holy.”*** And yet not only is he ***“holy”*** but he is ***“holy, holy, holy.”*** He is holy in every way. The word ***“holy”*** refers to something that is “sacred” or “set apart,” “different.” These creatures look around, and they realize that God is God, and we are not. We are different. He is separate from us. Out of all of ways we might describe God, the fact that he is “holy” perhaps includes all of the others. He is different. According to Psalm 111:9, his name is ***“holy and awesome.”***

As far as I can tell, this is the only word describing God that’s used three times in this way. It would be true to say that God is love, but God is never praised as being “love, love, love.” God is just, but he never praised as being “just, just, just.” God is wise, but he is never praised as being “wise, wise, wise.” He is, however, praised as being ***“holy, holy, holy.”*** And we see this, not only here, but also in Isaiah 6:3 as those living creatures before the throne called out to each other and said, ***“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.”*** And we remember Isaiah’s response to seeing and hearing these things. He says, ***“Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.”*** Isaiah sees that God is holy, and he is suddenly reminded that he himself is not holy. Compared to God, Isaiah realizes that he is ***“ruined,”*** he is ***“unclean.”*** And that is our reaction to worshiping God. We remind ourselves that God is God and we are not. We need what God has to offer. We need the grace, and mercy and forgiveness he provides. And so, we approach God with the utmost of humility. This reminds us that worship basically involves us praising God for who he is. He is holy, and so we praise him for being holy.

Not only that, but God is ***“the Lord God, the Almighty.”*** Literally, the Lord God has “every strength.” He is powerful in every way. There’s no burden he cannot lift, no battle he cannot win, he is ***“the Lord God, the Almighty.”*** What he chooses to do he will do. He does what he wants, with no limitation of power. This is not true of us, is it? I can think of many things I would like to do that I don’t have the power to do. With God, though, if he thinks it he can do it. His power is infinite. We think of all those times in Scripture where God is described as being ***“able.”*** In Hebrews 2:18, ***“...He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.”*** In Hebrews 7:25, ***“He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him.”*** In Ephesians 3:20, he is ***“able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think.”*** In 2 Corinthians 9:8, he is ***“able to make all grace abound to you.”*** In 2 Timothy 1:12, ***“He is able to guard what [we] have entrusted to Him until that day.”*** In Jude 24, he is ***“...able to keep [us] from stumbling, and [able] to make [us] stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy.”*** He is able. He is ***“the Lord God, the Almighty.”***

And finally, Almighty God is the One, ***“...WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME.”*** He transcends all of human history. We think of human rulers, and even the most powerful are limited to a tiny speck on the timeline of human history. God, though, was, he is, and he is to come. God is eternal. He is unaffected by time. He has always been with us. He is with us now. And he will be with us in the future – at all times and in all circumstances. We think of Moses’ praise in Psalm 90:2 when he says, ***“Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.”*** God is eternal.

I skipped over this when we first got to verse 8, but I would like for us to close this passage by noticing again that the four living creatures say these things continually, ***“and day and night they do not cease to say, ‘HOLY,***

**HOLY, HOLY is THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY.** Isn't that amazing? These four creatures are repeating this over and over, right now, crying out before the throne, **"HOLY, HOLY, HOLY."** They were saying this back in the days of Isaiah, **"HOLY, HOLY, HOLY."** In the days of John, as the church was being brutally persecuted, **"HOLY, HOLY, HOLY."** When we go to bed tonight, **"HOLY, HOLY, HOLY."** When we wake up in the morning, **"HOLY, HOLY, HOLY."** And they will repeat this throughout eternity, because it is the most true thing that has ever been said, **"HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is THE LORD GOD, the ALMIGHTY."**

### Conclusion:

Two thousand years ago, it seemed as if the entire world was caving in on the Lord's church. Rome was tightening its grip. Some churches seemed to be a state of chaos. Some were giving in to the pressure. Others were standing firm. God's people were at a critical moment. Into this situation, the Lord Jesus reveals himself to his good friend John. He gives some words of encouragement and some words of correction to a number of congregations. And then he opens with this scene right here: He cracks the door open and invites John to come in, where John sees this throne, almost indescribable, the source of brilliant colors, and thunder, and flashes of lightning, surrounded by torches, and the sea of glass, and the twenty-four elders, and these strange, yet powerful creatures, calling out continually, **"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."**

This scene right here dominates the rest of this book. Why? Because it's what those early Christians needed to hear. And it's what we need to hear this morning. This scene needs to come to mind as we come before God's throne in prayer, with the reminder that above all, God is holy in every way. He is separate. He is sacred. He is God, and we are not. We react to this scene in absolute awe. We allow ourselves to be amazed by this. It's almost too much for us to comprehend. But we allow this scene to set the tone. We allow this scene to change us.

- Imagine having this scene fresh on our minds as we get out of the car to step into work in the morning. Wouldn't this put things in perspective?
- Imagine having this scene in mind before we come home to our families at the end of the day, before we interact with our children, before we get into it with somebody we love.
- Imagine having this in mind as we face temptation. There's this thing we really want to do, but then we remember that at this very moment, God is on his throne, and these four living creatures are constantly calling out, "Holy, Holy, Holy."
- Imagine having this scene in mind as we talk to our friends who don't even know who the Lord is.

Knowing what's behind that door has a way of changing us. And that's what I hope we get out of this passage this morning: The understanding that things are not always as they seem, that God is on his throne, that he truly is **"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."**

As we close our study, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are truly holy in every way. There is no other God like you. You are greater and more awesome than any of us could ever possibly imagine. Thank you for revealing something of

yourself to us this morning. Thank you for opening that door into heaven so that John could describe for us what he was allowed to see.

As we partake of the Lord's Supper in just a few moments, we pray that we would see you for who you really are – the Lord God, the Almighty, Eternal Father. Thank you, Father, for Jesus. Thank you for making a way for us to be with you for eternity. We pray that you would make us holy. Protect us from the evil one.

We come to you this morning in the name of your Son, Jesus. Lord, come quickly, AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)