

Worship the Worthy One

Revelation 4, 5

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The book of Revelation was written to seven churches, groups of Christians in a specific place and time, to encourage them during a time of hardship. Because those seven churches represent the whole church, this message of encouragement and hope is also for the church in any time and place.

Those Christians in the late first century were experiencing persecution. The Roman Empire, especially in Asia Minor, was beginning to crack down on those who wouldn't worship the emperor. Some in these churches had already laid down their lives. Those Christians faced opposition to their faith and way of life. Roman officials, local trade guilds, and some Jewish leaders in the cities were making life hard for them. They experienced economic hardship. Those who wouldn't worship the various idols of their trade were unable to work. Those who wouldn't declare that "Caesar is lord" were restricted from buying and selling in the market. These churches also faced internal confusion, corruption of the Message, and teaching that advocated immoral lifestyles and worshiping idols.

What kind of hard times are you going through? Where do you find it difficult to live as a Christian? What kind of opposition to the faith do you face? What difficulties arise from trying to live new life in Christ in this fallen world? Is it sometimes too easy to go along with the world? To accommodate to the culture of selfishness and injustice and death?

The book of Revelation is a word of hope and encouragement to us. And not just because we can read the back of the book and see how the story turns out. Revelation shows us that life and victory and hope flow from the cross and resurrection of Jesus. The battle has already been won. God's decisive act has been accomplished. Of course, there's still much to do before we fully realize and experience the final victory. But we can do all that God calls us to knowing that the future is sure because of what God has already done in Jesus. Because his hope now fills us through the Holy Spirit.

Worshiping God ushers us into the reality of God's victory and justice and kingdom. Revelation is a book of worship. Leaf through it in a modern translation and notice the passages that are indented like poetry. Those are hymns, songs, and poems that John heard in his vision and that the early church sang and said and shouted. Revelation is to the New Testament something like what Psalms is to the Old Testament. It's a songbook and worship guide. It shows us that worship is response to what God has done, is doing, and will do. It tells us that worship gives new perspective on life in hard times. It teaches us in difficult times to keep worshipping God.

Chapters four and five help us see this most clearly. Here we find songs of praise to God the Creator and songs of praise to God the Redeemer. These two chapters are the theological heart of the book and give us the key to the whole Revelation. They follow the messages to the churches and come before the descriptions of the conflict between New Jerusalem and Fallen Babylon and of God's judgment on the rebellious order. Before all of that, John is given a vision of the throne of God and the adoration of God that goes on in heaven and in the church and in the hearts of his people everywhere and always.

At the end of Revelation's first section in chapter 3, Christ stood knocking at the door, waiting for the Christian community to open to him (3:20). Before we even have a chance to respond, a new section begins as John sees a door that already stands open (4:1). As Christ asks the church to open their door to him, he opens heaven's door to them in John's vision and writing. The word for "open" here suggests that the door is permanently open, probably because of Jesus' death and resurrection. The church has permanent and open access to heaven and to God (Ben Witherington, "Revelation," *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary*). Also, the churches have just heard that overcomers would sit with Christ on his throne, just as Christ overcame and sat on God's throne (3:21). Now they get a vision of God's throne and a vision of Christ, who conquered through faithful suffering (Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* 71).

This vision includes many symbolic features. Here's an interpretation of some of them.

The door standing open in heaven isn't off in the sky somewhere. Heaven isn't far away. It's God's realm, the spiritual reality that's all around us. It intersects and interlocks with physical reality in various ways. John is given a vision into that other dimension. The door is right in front of him.

The vision of God on the throne shows that God rules; Domitian, the Roman emperor, doesn't.

Jasper can be translucent or crystal clear; it sparkles and flashes. This represents God's holiness and glory.

Ruby or carnelian is deep red and looks like fire smoldering inside. This shows God's wrath that burns against sin.

The emerald rainbow pictures covenant mercy and serenity. There is comfort in the assurance of divine mercy that overarches everything God does.

The twenty-four elders represent all the redeemed people of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament. They represent us in worship like the twenty-four divisions of Levites represented Israel in worship at the temple. In these elders, the people in the seven churches can see the outcome of Christ's promises concerning his faithful people. Earlier, Christ promised that the faithful would wear white robes (3:5), would be given crowns (2:10), and would have a place on Christ's throne (3:21). The vision in chapter 4 reinforces the promise by showing a group of elders in white robes, wearing crowns, and sitting on thrones (Koester 74).

The lightning and thunder around the throne remind us of God's appearance to the people on Mt. Sinai. Several times in Revelation, at significant moments, lightning, thunder, and fire flash and roar (8:5; 11:19; 16:18). When God's purposes are being disclosed, we can expect things to be shaken up in alarming ways (N. T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*).

John sees seven lamps in front of God's throne. In chapter 1 seven lampstands symbolize the churches. These lamps symbolize the presence and fire of God's Spirit in the church.

There are various interpretations of the sea of glass (as with most of these symbols). In Exodus 24:10, God is seen standing on "something like a pavement of sapphire stone." This may be in the background of John's vision. This pavement or sea stresses the magnificence of the throne and

the distance still remaining between John and the throne. It's a picture of immense distance and serenity (Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code* 50).

The four living creatures probably represent what God has created. They combine elements of the seraphim Isaiah saw (chap. 6) and the cherubim that Ezekiel saw (chap. 1). They constantly praise God who is holy and everlasting: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." Creation, the natural order, praises God by being what it is, what it's made for. The sky, the earth, and the creatures in them give glory to God by being what God made them to be.

And whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to God who rules and lives forever, the twenty-four elders fall down before God who rules, and worship God who lives forever, casting their crowns before the throne.

This shows what it is to acknowledge God, to worship God as our God and to give our allegiance and loyalty to God. This is the constant action of these beings in the vision. It's interesting that in chapter 5, one of these elders will speak with John. How can he do that if he is always bowing down and laying his crown at God's feet?

For one thing, this reminds us that this is a vision. Sort of like in a dream, different things can happen at the same time. More importantly, it means that worship is the constant attitude and disposition of God's people. Whatever we're doing, wherever we are, in the inner sanctuary of our hearts we can join this heavenly chorus—seeing God for who he is, committing ourselves to God, yielding to God's authority. Through faith, we perceive that God is always before us and we worship him. We can practice the presence of God and give him praise, honor, and glory all the time.

That doesn't mean we don't need to worship together. Our constant attitude of worship and adoration prepares us for our time together in worship. And our worshipping together prepares us to turn to God and adore him every moment, every day.

Here's the song the elders sing as the living creatures affirm God's holiness:

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

This is worship, ascribing the *worship* of the Lord God, recognizing and declaring that God is worthy, that God deserves to be praised and honored and glorified. The natural world, animals and such, praise God simply by being. But humans can think about worshiping God. One thing that sets humans apart is that we can say the word "because." We worship because we understand that God is worthy, God is deserving of praise and adoration.

This song of praise to God the Creator reminds us that God has made us and the world we live in. Though sin has disrupted and corrupted God's good creation, still "this is our Father's world." Creation is good because of its good origin. God is to be honored by and for all that God has made.

Our faith is in the God who chooses to create. And that leads us to care about the earth and people and relationships and environment and everything that has to do with life in this world God has made. Redemption, salvation doesn't take us out of the real world, but forgives and cleanses and transforms us in this time and place. God's will, God's awesome decision, is the starting point for every fact about life and how we live (Earl Palmer, *The Communicator's Commentary NT Vol 12: 1, 2, 3 John and Revelation*).

Now in his vision John sees God holding a scroll that has writing on both sides and seven seals securing it. This scroll represents the destiny and meaning of the creation that God has just been praised for. It shows God's purposes for creation, especially God's purposes in response to creation in its rebellion against God.

A mighty angel asks, "Who is worthy, who deserves, to loose the seals and open the scroll?" This scroll contains God's plan to undo and overthrow the world-destroying powers and schemes that have gained so much ground. God's plan includes planting and nurturing the world-rescuing project that will get creation back on track and in the right direction (Wright). But no one worthy was found in all creation. No one deserves to

open the scroll because there's no one who hasn't contributed to creation's problems. No one can reveal or accomplish God's purposes for what he has made.

This breaks John's heart. He weeps and weeps because there's no one worthy to open the scroll, to know its contents, to bring about what it says.

Then one of the elders speaks to John: "Don't cry. Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." Jesus is a descendant of King David, of the tribe of Judah, who was once called a "lion's cub" (Genesis 49:9). He's the Messiah, God's chosen One, who comes from beyond creation. And he is able. The triumphant, victorious Lion is worthy. He can discern and declare and fulfill God's purposes for us all, for all that God has made.

So John looks to this Lion—and he sees a *Lamb that was slain*.

The victorious, powerful Lion is a little Lamb that's been sacrificed, slaughtered. And yet, this Lamb is alive and stands in the center of God's throne. Sacrificial love is at the center of the throne of the universe. Sacrificial love is at the heart of God.

The Lamb has seven horns that represent perfect and complete power. He has seven eyes that represent perfect and complete knowledge.

Jesus is the Lamb who is a Lion. Jesus is the one who was slain. Jesus is the one who is able to make God's purpose known and fulfill it. He comes and takes the scroll from God's right hand.

And when he takes the scroll, the choir of living creatures and elders that never stops praising God falls down before him and sings a new song of praise.

Bowls of incense are mingled with the heavenly choir's praise. The incense is the prayers of the saints. Who are the saints? We are. "The ordinary, faithful, humble prayers of Christians here on earth appear in heaven as glorious sweet-smelling incense." The elders who represent God's people also have harps. Maybe our song of praise, even if it's feeble and out of tune, appears as heavenly music.

Here's the song the heavenly choir and we sing to the Lamb:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.

Because of Jesus' death on the cross, people are able to come out of Fallen Babylon, the rebellious order. People from all over the world can become citizens of New Jerusalem, the kingdom of God. Here's a glorious vision of people from every tribe, every language, every people group, every nation worshiping God and declaring the worth of the Lord Jesus Christ. The "Great Commission" is being fulfilled. Our witness and mission are part of helping this great crowd of people come together to praise God.

Then, joining the creatures and the redeemed people in worship, untold numbers of angels add their voices:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!

This seven-fold praise shows the fullness of praise and worship to God and the Lamb.

Then everything in all creation joins in the song:

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever!

The four living creatures affirm this by saying, "Amen! So be it! It is so!" And the elders who are always falling down to worship, fall down and worship.

Whatever our hard times, whatever our struggles, this vision of God's throne, God's rule, of Jesus' sacrifice and victory, of the glory and praise that are God's—this all gives us a new perspective. In and through all that's going on, God is working out his purposes in Jesus Christ. God's sacrificial love redeems us and fulfills us. We can trust God in the midst of any

circumstances. We can praise and worship God all the time, knowing that we are his and his purposes for us are good and loving.

Will we worship, will we declare the worth of God who creates, who made us as part of his good creation? Will we worship, will we declare the worth of Jesus, God's Son, who died and rose again to redeem us, to restore us because our sin had kept us from being who God made us to be? Will we recognize that all earthly powers are cheap imitations of the rule of the Lord God who truly reigns? And will we be God's royal priesthood, "summing up creation's praises before him but also bringing his rescuing rule to bear on the world" (Wright)?