

THE GOD WE WORSHIP

SERIES: THE NOW OF WORSHIP

By Doug Goins

Recently our elders wrote a mission statement which emphasizes our commitment to worship. It states,

As a local church, operating under the direction of Jesus as Lord and Head, Peninsula Bible Church is called to serve God in three ways:

*to serve Him directly in worship;
to serve His redeemed people in nurture;
to serve His lost world in witness.*

We desire to be a worshipping church....Gathering corporately in adoring veneration of God as a response of love."

Most Christians would agree with that desire, but it becomes more difficult when we try to define the common basis of our worship, what the focus of our worship ought to be, as the foundation of our corporate life.

There are many questions we could ask as to what a corporate worship experience should be. Do we define worship by our feelings about God? Is it a religious, cultural consensus? Do we find a common cultural language and all feel comfortable with that? Is it a personal spiritual experience, what feels good to us?

Think of a time that you left a service saying to yourself, "That was a good worship service." The important question for you to ask is, "Why was that a good service? Why was that experience the right worship experience?" Is it the right set of circumstances, or the right external stimulus--the people, the music, the energy--that defined good worship for you? Is it defined by musical style or preaching style or the approach to prayer? Or is it perhaps the formality or the lack of formality that the leaders exhibit in the worship experience? Is it determined by the age of the people around you? Do you prefer to worship in predictability, the security that comes from knowing what is coming next? Or is the right worship experience unpredictable, adventurous, and spontaneous? What is more appropriate for corporate worship, monomedia or multimedia?

These are all things that can divide us and make it difficult to come to a common consensus in terms of what worship is about. I want to take some of these issues seriously in this preaching series. In these weeks we will be concerned about our experience, the existential nature of our worship life as a church. The title of the series, "The Now of Worship," comes from Psalm 95:7, where the psalmist says, "O that today [right now, in the here and now] you would hearken to his voice [the voice of God]!"

But the passage we are examining, Revelation 4 and 5, transcends all these issues. The apostle John's vision for community worship is bigger than any of our personal desires. It is beyond our felt needs or our own personal experience. His vision of worship is mind-blowing. In a cosmic setting, God opens the door for us between time and eternity, and he gives us a glimpse of heavenly worship itself: the resurrected, exalted Jesus Christ invites the apostle John into the heavenlies. At the center of this awesome worship experience is God himself, the God we worship, seated on a throne. We will find that he must be the foundation and the focus of our worship.

Ultimately, worship is about God, it is not about us. Our struggle is to keep him in his proper place. Let's begin at

Revelation 3:20. The first voice we hear is the voice of the Lord Jesus speaking to the church in Laodicea:

"...Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads. From the throne issue flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, and before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God; and before the throne there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And round 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 a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within,... (3:20-4:8a).

Have you ever seen anything like this in church? Our God is not a safe, predictable deity, is he?

The experience of worship into which John is drawn comes out of intimacy, a relationship at a dinner table. His view of worship is borne out of an intimate love relationship with Jesus. Here it speaks of a door that must be opened to allow Jesus into our life. In chapter 4, the door is opened into worship in the heavenlies, in God's presence, and clearly we come into worship at his invitation. He awaits us in worship, inviting us to join him in our service of worship.

We see in this passage that God is seated on the throne of majesty, of authority, of sovereignty. Psalm 93:2 speaks of an eternal throne, one that has always existed. God has always been the sovereign one. Our worship is essentially an act of attention to his majesty. In the vision of chapters 4 and 5, this living, powerful God is the ruler. He speaks, he creates, he reveals truth, he speaks judgment where necessary, but he also speaks redemption and forgiveness. He brings order where there is chaos. Above all, he brings incredible blessing, spiritual enrichment to our lives when we see him for who he is in worship.

In the vision, we see God is at the center of concentric circles that expand into eternity. Everything and everyone is focusing on him. The twenty-four elders are a double twelve. They represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of the New Testament, the old Israel and the new church. They represent all of redeemed humanity who are gathered around the throne. The four living creatures are symbols representing the different aspects of God's created world, the natural order of which we are a part. There are lions representing wild animals; oxen, which are domesticated livestock; the face of a man represents humanity; and finally, the eagle, which are the soaring birds in the sky. In chapter 5, this worship scene also adds angels beyond number surrounding the throne, as well as all of redeemed creation.

We see all of creation gather in response to God. This is the essence of worship. It is response to who God is, his essential being, his character; and it is response to his amazing, creative saving activity. He is our creator, and he is our redeemer. Out of that reality come five hymns of worship and praise, expressions of adoration. The four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, then all the angels in heaven, and finally at the end of chapter 5, everything that God ever created, including us, joins in. It grows and grows, and swells and swells. More voices, more instrumentation. The hymns come more quickly as the two chapters unfold in the vision. Five hymns set the pattern for our corporate worship and define the content of our corporate worship life, all emphasizing the objective reality of this God whom we serve and love.

We tell God the truth about himself

Beginning with Revelation 4:8b, a hymn focuses on the character and being of God. It is not what God does, but who God is:

**"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!"**

The first important thing about true Biblical worship is that we tell God the truth about himself. We worship him for who he is. The Bible tells us that he is the only God, the highest. He is the Lord God, the Heavenly King, the Almighty God, the Father, the Holy One, the Eternal One, to pick out a few of the phrases descriptive of him in the Scriptures. And our response is to ascribe honor to him. Psalm 29:1-2, says,

**Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.**

**Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy array.**

When I was a high school youth minister many years ago, a girl who was exploring faith said to me very innocently, "You know, God seems awfully egocentric to me. God likes all this attention. Does he really need people saying all that great stuff about him? Does he need all those praises piled up? Is he that insecure that he needs us telling great stuff about him?" Somewhere in his early writings, Robert Webber addresses this issue of how we speak to God in worship:

God only wants us to speak the truth about him. Even as in our own personal worth, we appreciate people telling the truth about us and shy away from those who either overestimate or underestimate us. So God wants us to speak the truth about him. The truth is that he is the creator, that he is ultimate, that he is the highest, the holiest, the one most perfect in his being. Now what would you think of God if he were to shuffle his feet in celestial dust and say, "Aw, shucks," refusing to be honest about himself?

We see ourselves in proper relationship to God

When we see God for who he is, as the highest, the holiest, the one exalted on his throne, then the corollary is that we see ourselves in a right and proper relationship to him. In Isaiah 6, the prophet is in the temple in Jerusalem and has a vision similar to John's, a vision into heaven. Even the language is similar. The seraphim sing the same hymn: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (verse 3). Isaiah is so overwhelmed with the vision of God he falls on his face. He says, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" When he saw God's holiness, he realized his own sinfulness. Likewise, when we see God in his glory, then we have to see ourselves as sinners, people who are desperately in need of grace, of mercy, of forgiveness. We are creatures, and he is the creator. There is a categorical difference. Psalm 100:3 says,

**"Know that the Lord is God!
It is he that made us, and we are his..."**

So we cannot come into worship with any kind of arrogance, any kind of presumption. Confession of sin and repentance from sin must be a consistent part of our worship life together, our common experience.

In this hymn of Revelation 4:8, worship is focused on the being of God, the character of God. But now, beginning with verse 9, three more hymns unfold that focus not only on who God is, but on the incredible things he has accomplished for us. First, he is our creator and sustainer, and secondly he is our savior, redeemer God. What is

wonderful about the God of the Bible is that he is not impersonal or distant, but he is passionately involved in the life that we experience. He is a God who works in human history. And these actions of God invoke in us a desire to confess how worthy he is. In fact, "worthy" begins all three of the next hymns. Beginning at 4:11, it says, "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God." Later in 5:9, the hymn says of the Lord Jesus, "Worthy art thou to take the scroll...." And then in 5:12 it says, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,..." Worthy: he is deserving of the honor, the attention that we give to him. The Old English word "worthship" is the forerunner to our modern word worship. So when we worship, we are essentially worth-shiping him because he is deserving of the attention.

We worship God as our creator

First of all, he is worth our worship, because he is our creator God. Let's read 4:9-11:

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

**"Worthy art thou, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for thou didst create all things,
and by thy will they existed and were created."**

The four living creatures are singing, and they sing because everything on earth was created by God's will, and it continues to exist by his will. He is the Lord of creation, and the natural world all around us affirms that there is more to life than what we can see or feel or touch or taste. It is what the philosophers call the interiority of the universe. And that sense invokes in us a worshipful response to the creator.

This past summer I visited Yosemite National Park for the first time in several years. I was in awe as I experienced Glacier Point at sunset. The granite peaks in the Roberts Range came alive with alpenglow, the brilliant peach and rose colors washing the granite. I got goosebumps, not because I worship nature, but because I was so grateful to a creator God who created that beauty out of love for us. Similarly, when I was in the delivery room for the births of all three of our youngest children, I watched in awe as the incredible miracle of life unfolded. Each time I was overwhelmed and brought to tears, not just because God gave me children, but because of his goodness as a lifegiver. That is the creator God we worship.

When God gave the law at Mount Sinai, he carefully explained his sovereignty over creation in the fourth commandment (Exodus 20:8-11). He determined that a day be set apart to worship him because he worked as creator for six days, and then rested on the seventh day. Therefore, Israel was to set aside one day to worship, to remember God's act of creation. One of the important implications of that commandment for the Israelites as well as for us today is that all of life is sacred. We are to have a holistic view of life so that everything--eating and drinking and sleeping and working and studying and loving and playing--relates to God. He is involved in every aspect of our life. In the Sabbath, God established a sign of his Lordship over all our time and activity, and it is through this symbol we recognize God's rightful claim to every moment of our life. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul restates this truth in his sermon in Acts 17. Paul says, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth,... 'In him we live and move and have our being'" (verses 24a, 28). We worship God because he is our creator and sustainer in life.

We worship God as our Savior

In the next two hymns we focus on what he has done as our redeemer God, the God who saves us from the power of sin, the bondage of sin, the guilt of sin. Our salvation has been accomplished with the sacrifice of the Lamb, a Lamb who chose to conquer through self-sacrifice, through death. In his meekness, he is now majestic

when we see him in this vision. John writes (5:1-7):

And 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 strong 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 wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, "Weep not; lo, 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.

The scroll in God's hand is the book of the mysteries of life, the book that reveals the destiny of the world. It answers all the great unanswerable questions that people have been asking since the beginning of time, questions about good and evil, about sin and suffering, about bondage and freedom. All of us know that we are trapped in the misery of this world. We cannot break free from the evil around us, and we know what it is like to feel helpless and hopeless, to be caught in the grip of something stronger than we are. And the agony we experience in this fallen world is because of the consequence of sin. It is very real. We see people struggle all around us. In the same way, we know of our inability to deal with the guilt of our own sin. The seals on the scrolls which nobody can break suggest our impotence, our powerlessness to solve problems by ourselves.

The apostle is driven to tears, weeping that no one can break the seals and open the book. But the great news from this vision is that one is found--the Lamb of God, slain before the foundation of the world! And because of the death of that Lamb, there is victory over sin and death and hell. The seals are opened, and God's saving purposes for our world and for us are worked out.

We worship God for creating a covenant community

The response in heaven is immediate. Look at verses 8-10:

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 with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; and they sang a new song, saying,

**"Worthy art thou to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for thou wast slain and by thy blood
didst ransom men for God
from every tribe and tongue and
people and nation,
and hast made them a kingdom and
priests to our God,
and they shall reign on earth."**

As expressed in this hymn, our adoration is based on God establishing a covenant relationship with us. In the Old Testament at Mount Sinai, God announced a covenant relationship in the giving of the law. Exodus 20 tells us that the covenant relationship was sealed in blood. A sacrifice was offered to ratify the covenant. Deuteronomy 7:6 states that Israel became a people holy to the Lord, chosen to be a people for his own possession. So the Lord became Israel's God, and Israel became to him a special people in this covenant relationship of love.

In the New Testament, through Jesus Christ, we are offered a new covenant relationship, sealed with Christ's blood. This hymn tells us that his death was purposeful, it was sacrificial, and the result was ransom. We were liberated, we were emancipated from the misery and the slavery of sin. This hymn glories in the fact that God

loved our world so much that he sent Christ to die for all of its inhabitants--every tribal identity, every language on the face of the earth, every people group, from every national origin. Christ died for everyone, and out of that incredible diversity of humanity around the face of the earth, we have been made into one royal kingdom. We have a common identity, a oneness in Jesus Christ. This hymn celebrates our kingdom citizenship. I hope you see yourselves as royalty, a daughter or a son of the king. You are part of his eternal kingdom. Secondly, the hymn celebrates the fact that we are priests. We have been given priestly access into the very presence of God because Jesus opened the new and living way into his presence (Hebrews 10:20). And finally, in the last phrase of 5:10, we are promised triumph. We will reign on earth, the triumph of victorious living under any circumstances.

The apostle Peter echoes this great theme: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). We have a new identity, Peter says, so we can be worshipping people. We can be people who express praise and adoration and thanksgiving. We are saved to be worshipers. "Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy" (2:10). The community we have been placed into is the body of Christ. It is the church, and that's us. We are an extension of the incarnation, the continued presence of Christ on earth. We are a divine organism, not a human institution. We are inhabited by the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit.

We worship God for saving us through Jesus' death

The music accelerates and intensifies. It swells as angels join the choir. First, redeemed humanity, then elders and creatures, and now angels.

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice [one voice--unity in worship] 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!" (5:11,12)

This hymn of praise is in response to God's act of redeeming mercy through the saving death of Jesus Christ. Returning to the Old Testament roots for this truth, Israel was commanded to worship God because he had redeemed them from Egypt. Deuteronomy 5:15 says, "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day." The command is to worship in a regular rhythm every week, remembering their Savior God.

As we see throughout the psalms, Israel's corporate worship life is full of this kind of praise and adoration, the memories that Israel had of God's salvation. Psalm 93 affirms that it was God's mighty arm of strength on which the people depended. They could not save themselves. Because God is personal he is involved in history, whether it was the nation Israel, his church, or our individual histories. He enters in power and in love, and redeems Israel from bondage. As New Testament Christians, we worship because he entered our history through the incarnation to redeem us. Like Israel, we could not save ourselves, but because of the Lamb that was slain, we are free from the bondage of sin.

In another great hymn, the apostle Paul celebrates and exults in our identity as redeemed ones. Ephesians 1:3-8: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us." This is overwhelming. This is who we are.

A finale of adoration and praise

The last hymn of this passage is the grand finale. It is as if all the stops are pulled out on the pipe organ, every

instrument is playing full volume, every voice is singing as loudly as it can. Every created being, including us, joins together:

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshipped. (5:13-14)

The composer George Friderick Handel related how overwhelmed he was by reading this heavenly version of worship. He was moved to tears by the enormity, by the grandeur of this vision of God as creator and redeemer--*his* creator, *his* redeemer. As a result, he included all five of these hymn texts in his magnificent oratorio, *The Messiah*. Handel told of how he came to write that monumental work: "*I saw the heavens open, and God upon his great, white throne*" [italics added].

Our experience ought to be the same. This vision is more than just a glimpse into the future, of what heaven will be. It is about now. This collage of images should focus our perception of worship. It tells us what worship ought to be in all times, in every place. What this passage reveals about the condition of our hearts right now is probably just as important as what it reveals about the future. What do you see when you come to worship?

In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard writes a little paragraph entitled "Travelers Unaware:"

"Why do people in churches seem to be cheerful, brainless tourists on a package tour of the Absolute? ...On the whole I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." (1)

Is that uncomfortably close to your experience in worship? It does not have to be. We truly can be a worshipping people as God intended us to be. We can choose to respond to the invitation of our Lord and Savior. Remember, the first invitation was to personal relationship, to table fellowship, to intimacy with Jesus; then came an invitation to the grandeur of the heavenly throne room. We can put God back in his rightful place at the center of our worship life, but the question remains: Would you like for him to "draw us out to where we can never return?"

Once again, Jesus invites us: "...Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

"After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne!"

NOTES:

1. Dillard, Annie, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, © 1982, Harper Perennial, a division of Harper Collins, New York, NY. P. 58.

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