

Vital Worship



This week, we are starting a 4 week series on Vital Worship, where we will be looking at different aspects of worship. It is easy to think that 'worship' is restricted to a series of activities that happen at church or even, to a particular church worship style. Vital Worship must permeate all aspects of Christian life.

ICEBREAKER: As part of a Bible College subject on "Christian Worship", I was given a practical assignment. I had to attend worship services at churches from three different Christian traditions, then to write a reflection about lessons I learnt about Christian worship. My choices included a house church, a Pentecostal church and a traditional Anglican (Prayer Book) service.

- What different church worship styles have been part of your experience? What have you learnt from each one about Christian worship? What things did you find uncomfortable or strange?

READ: Revelation 4

- What are your initial thoughts and response to this passage? What questions do you have?

In this chapter, the apostle John was transported 'in the Spirit' through the doors of heaven. We're not told what he thought about the command. Instead, we are given a description of his experience. We can safely assume that John had never before had this sort of worship experience. Gordon Fee writes:

"All together this series of images is intended to inspire awe and wonder on the part of the reader, who is being brought into the presence of God, and before whom only awe and worship are the worthy responses; and that is what John now goes on to describe."¹

- What do we learn about God in this passage?

In Rev 4:5, we read of "flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder" coming from the throne.

- Read Ps 29:1-11. What physical phenomena heralded the presence of God? How does the Psalmist interpret these 'acts of God'? How should we respond?
- Read Ex 19:16-19. In this passage, the people were assembled at Mt Sinai and had been 'consecrated' in preparation for God coming near. What physical phenomena signalled God's presence? How did God's people regard these 'acts of God'? How did they respond? (Ex 19:16)?

Fee highlights something about Rev 4, that we may not immediately notice: God's name isn't mentioned, but everyone's focus is on Him.

"John does not say anything about God as such, not even using language such as Daniel's "Ancient of Days." Rather he speaks only of someone "sitting on [the throne]" (v. 2; cf. vv. 9–10). That this is a stand-in for the eternal God is made known by several features: first, the One sitting on the throne is the central reality in the entire vision; second, the heavenly beings in worship use the language of "the Lord God Almighty," acclaiming, "you are worthy, our Lord and God" (v. 11); and third, in the second part of the vision (ch. 5) the scroll that will unveil the future is "*in the right hand* of him who sat on the throne." Thus, despite John's reluctance to describe God, God's *presence* predominates in every way."²

In heaven, God (and his throne, representing his rule and reign) is the "central reality". For John, there only was a door separating heaven and his life on earth. God and heaven exist in the 'here and now'.

- Why is it so easy for us to forget, that God expects to be the central reality in our lives?

Read the two declarations of praise in Rev 4:8 and Rev 4:11.

- What contrast(s) do we find in these verses, between the nature of God vs the human beings (and the rest of creation)? Why is it important to remember these when we come to worship?
- In Rev 4:9, 11, what four things are we to bring to God and ascribe to God in our worship? Why?

¹ Fee, G. D. *Revelation* (2011). Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, p71.

² Fee, G. D. *Revelation* (2011). Eugene, OR: Cascade Books. p67.

Robert Webber comments that “worship anticipates the future”, looking forward to “God’s rescue of the entire created order and the establishment of his rule over all heaven and earth” and anticipates “that *place* and *time* when God’s rule is being done *on earth as it is in heaven*.”³

- Why do you think that Jesus told us to seek/ yearn/ desire for God’s kingdom (Matt 6:33) and taught us to pray, both personally and corporately, to ask God: ‘*your kingdom come*’ (Matt 6:10)?
- Read Isaiah 45:22-25; Rom 14:11-12; Phil 2:9-11; Rev 7:9-12. What do these verses remind us about the future reality of worship?

The middle section of Rev 4 includes imagery that is strange to us. Even Biblical scholars don’t necessarily agree on how to interpret it. The book of Revelation is part of a genre called ‘apocalypse’. This type of literature is found in a number of Old Testament books and in the last book of the New Testament. It involves a divine revelation by an ‘other worldly’ being to a human recipient, often including vivid (even bizarre) symbolism.⁴ Jewish readers would have had an insight into the imagery in today’s passage, as:

“The primary Old Testament background for the way the present vision is presented can be found in Isaiah 6:1-3 and Ezekiel 1:4-14 and 1:22–28.”⁵

In Isaiah 6, we read of the Lord seated on a throne and surrounded by seraphim (angels) who pronounce the holiness and glory of God. In Daniel 7:13-14, there is a vision of “one like a son of man” being given “authority, glory and sovereign power.” We find a complex description of the creatures with the four faces - human being, ox, lion and eagle - in Ezekiel 1. We discover in Ezekiel 1, that they moved through the land of Babylon in perfect harmony with the Spirit – heralding the power and reign of God. We discover in Rev 4, that they perpetually praised God.

Daniel, the priest/ prophet Ezekiel and the apostle John were all in captivity and exile when they received their visions of God. (Daniel and Ezekiel were in Babylon, with the defeated people of God. John was banished to the Isle of Patmos by the Romans, who were persecuting and killing Christians). Revelation 4:8 cites Is 6:3, where we read that the Seraphim announced: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty.” In the Old Testament, “LORD Almighty” is also translated as the “LORD of Hosts”. God, the King, is also named as the “Divine Warrior” who “intervenes on behalf of his people and overthrows their enemies”.⁶

- These men saw no physical evidence of God’s reign in their world. What would it have meant for these men – and the people of God - to be given a vision of God, his reign and his glory, at this time in their lives? What lessons do you think God wanted them to learn from their visions?

One contrast in this passage is that, in Rev 4:4, we are told that the twenty-four elders are sitting on thrones. In Rev 4:8, the living creatures “day and night, never stop” their praise for God. Then, in Rev 4:9-10, “whenever the living creatures” announce their praise, the elders fall down before the throne of God. We get the picture that, in heaven, worship is a 24/7 activity – and the elders don’t get much chance to sit around on their thrones. God is eternal. Worship is an eternal activity and is not a ‘passive’ activity.

The ‘Westminster Shorter Catechism’ begins with the following question and answer:

Quest. 1. What is the chief end of man?

Ans. 1. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, (1) and to enjoy him for ever. (2)⁷

- This catechism is grounded on three passages. What do these verses teach us about worship?
 - (1) 1 Cor 10:31; Rom 11:36;
 - (2) Ps 73:25-28
- What is the dominant way that you think about and engage in ‘worship’?
 - Worship as proclamation (eg of the reign and rule of God, of God’s salvation, etc)?
 - Worship as praise (eg of who God is and what God has done)?
 - Worship as action (eg social action, being actively involved in justice and mercy)?
 - Worship as lifestyle (encompassing all of life’s activities)?
 - Other?

REFLECT & PRAY: As a group, make a list of some attributes of God. Use these as a focus of prayer, to praise God.

³ Webber, R.E. *Ancient Future Worship. Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative.* (2008) Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. p57-58.

⁴ Morris, L. *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20). (1987) Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p25.

⁵ Fee, G. D. *Revelation* (2011). Eugene, OR: Cascade Books. p67.

⁶ Watts, J. D. W. *Isaiah 1–33* (Revised Edition, Vol. 24) (2005). Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc. p.cix.

⁷ <http://www.westminsterconfession.org/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism.php>

The Westminster Shorter Catechism: *The original text of 1647, with the Assembly’s proof texts.*