

Before the Throne
Revelation 4:9-11
1/11/2015

William Temple once defined worship this way: “[W]orship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose -- and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.” This definition of worship is extremely helpful and full. It helps us understand what the living creatures and the elders are doing in chapter 4, and what we do on Sunday, as we join with them.

What does it look like, this worship? It looks like people and angels falling on their faces before the throne of God above. The question that haunted me as soon as I read it in one of the commentaries was this: for whom would we do this? Would we bow ourselves all the way to the ground in front of God, if we saw Him? Ah, there's the problem: we don't see Him. And so we don't bow down to Him. We don't submit ourselves to God. We don't allow His beauty to purify our imagination, we don't open up our hearts to His love, and we certainly don't surrender our wills to His purpose! Rather than adoring God, we would almost rather think of anything else. However, our passage this morning does not let us think of anything else. It puts God as the object of our worship front and center.

The first thing we need to see in this passage is the historical context. Remember that John was writing this to churches experiencing persecution. In particular, the churches were being required to bow down to the emperor. In fact, the emperor Domitian called himself lord and god. So, in verse 11, when the elders say that only our God in heaven is Lord and God, they are saying not just worshiping God. They are also reminding the persecuted church that Caesar is not Lord. Only the one true God is worthy of our worship. There will come a time in America when we will have to choose whether to bow down to the growing monster that is the state and government of this land, and which will require us to do things that God forbids, or will forbid us to do things which God commands; or whether we will refuse and accept the consequences of that action. We will have to make the choice one day between what is right and what is easy. Measure in your mind now the weight between these alternatives, and pray, pray, and pray that all of us will have the courage to do the right thing, no matter what the consequences. We bow to one master alone, and that is not the US government.

The second thing we need to see in this passage is the order of worship. First the living creatures recite the three-fold hymn about the holiness of God. It is

in reaction to that, much like a call and response, that the elders fall down before the throne. They worship, in other words, in reaction to the holiness of God. So, we cannot forget what we looked at last time in terms of the holiness of God, as we look at heavenly worship this week. Incidentally, another connection with verses 6-8 in our passage is the emphasis on the eternal nature of God. The angels sang about the God who was, who is, and who is to come. John twice mentions the fact that the One seated on the throne lives forever and ever. That echoes what the angels sang about God. It would also remind the persecuted church that their God is forever, while the Roman emperors are but for season. Now, these elders are almost certainly human beings. The order of worship, then, is that the angelic worship is what starts everything, and human beings react to that angelic worship. It is the same with us today. We are not starting anything new by our worship. Rather, we are following in the footsteps of the angels when we worship. Angels are, therefore, the first in worship, and we respond here on earth in order to join the angelic worship in heaven.

The third thing to see in this passage is the picture of royalty. We have seen that before (remember the little exhortation a few months back that we should address each other as “your majesty” every now and then?). Here we see royalty in two main aspects. The first aspect is that the throne of God is the focus of this passage. Three times the text mentions the throne. The throne is a way of focusing our attention on the One seated on the throne. It emphasizes His kingly rule over all the kingdoms of this world (again, an implicit contrast here to Domitian, the Roman emperor, who, contrary to what he himself might think, did not rule all the kingdoms of this world).

The even bigger contrast between the one true God and Domitian is the contrast between the one true God and the beast in 13:4. People worship the beast, and believe that there is no one like him. But he is merely a counterfeit. One of the patterns that we are going to see a lot in the rest of the book of Revelation is the pattern of counterfeiting. Satan cannot do or make anything really original. Instead, he takes what God has done and distorts it. So, in Revelation, Satan has a counterfeit of everything that is true. There is a counterfeit Trinity, a counterfeit church, and counterfeit worship. He tries to do a twisted version of God's true version. And so, one of the messages we need to take from Revelation is that we need to be able to spot the counterfeit. We do that by knowing the true version so well that the counterfeit sticks out like a sore thumb. More on that in the coming months, Lord-willing.

The second aspect of royalty we see here is the derived royalty of the 24 elders. In verse 10 the elders cast down their crowns before the One who is seated on the throne. The elders have crowns. We have said before that these elders are almost certainly 12 representatives of the 12 tribes plus the 12 apostles. They represent all of God's people together. They will reign over the new heavens and

the new earth. But by casting their crowns down before the God of heaven, what they are saying by that is that their authority is a subordinate authority to God's authority. They reign as kings under the great King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The fourth thing we need to look at in this passage is the hymn that the elders sing to the Lord God. We have already seen that they ascribe true Lordship and Godhood to the one true God, and not to Domitian, and certainly not to the beast. Only God is worthy to receive worship. No one and nothing else is worthy.

However, we might ask the question of how God receives glory and honor and power from us when He is already perfect in those things. We do not add glory or power to God. Rather, going back to our definition of worship, God receives glory from us when we worship Him. He “receives” power when we submit our wills and our powers to God's will and God's power. So, we praise Him, and we use our strength to honor Him. That is, simply enough, what John is saying, and what the elders are saying when they praise the Lord God.

The last thing to notice about the text is the emphasis on creation as the basis for the elders' worship. The creation of God certainly declares His glory among the nations. It is interesting that after they summarize God's creative act, they mention the existence of creation before saying once again that God created all things. When they say that “by your will they existed,” what they are talking about is God's providential care for all creation. It is pastorally important that the persecuted church remembers God's providence constantly. That is the reason why it is mentioned before creation in that last phrase. Persecution, in other words, does not mean that God has let something slip, or that He is no longer in control.

In applying this text to our lives, let us be reminded once again of what worship is: “[W]orship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose -- and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.”

Worship of God is an excellent antidote to many problems that we face here on earth. It is an excellent antidote to sin in our lives. Sin is always selfish, whereas worship is entirely unselfish. The more we worship God, the more like Him we become, and the less selfish we become. Worship needs to be the number one highest priority in our lives. Nothing should trump the worship of God. What we need, more than anything else in the Christian life, is to become like our God. And the very best way to become just like our God is to worship Him.

Secondly, we are usually caught up in building one of two kingdoms. Either we are building up our own kingdom, or we are building up God's kingdom. We cannot do both simultaneously. We have to remember that we don't reign with God

until the next life. That is a heavenly vision where the elders have crowns. We don't have crowns now. We have to wait for them. We have the right to them, but not the actual possession of them. We are underage, if you will. They are being kept in heaven for us until we come of age. We tend to want our crowns here and now, right away. This is partly because we live in an instant gratification culture, which can't stand to wait for anything. And it is partly because we lose sight of how much better heaven is than earth. And so we begin to think that we can have our heaven right here and now. As one popular heretic has it, you can have your best life right here and now. **WE ARE PILGRIMS!** We cannot ever forget it.

Thirdly, it is right and proper to worship God because of His acts of creation and providence. Creation is usually fairly easy for us to see. But how about when God has just given you a particularly beautiful nudge of providence? Do you worship God because of those little things that He does in your life daily? How about worshipping God not in spite of the discipline He sends our way, but because of that discipline? That's a tough one, isn't it? We don't like discipline. But the book of Hebrews tells us rightly how to view it. If God did not discipline us, then we would be as illegitimate sons. God disciplines those He loves. We can take comfort, then, when God disciplines us, knowing that He loves us, and that if He did not discipline us, then it means He is simply letting us go our own merry way to the pits of Hell. Surely a little pain now is better than a whole lot more pain later on? So rejoice in the discipline and learn from it. That is all part of God's providential working out of His plan.

God's plan is to remake us into the spitting image of His Son, so that we may all worship God with pure worship. The best thing about worship for us is that in worshipping God we become like Him. It is not some selfish God trying to keep all the glory for Himself. No, God knows and has told us that we are never more like God than when we are worshipping Him. We become like what we worship. Let's make sure we worship the one true God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our Triune God, who lives forever and ever.