

THE WEIGHT OF GLORY

Revelation 4:6-11

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, December 9, 2012

Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created (Rev. 4:11).

In last week's sermon I made the comment that Revelation 4 should be considered one of the Bible's greatest chapters. My reasoning is that it presents what is perhaps the most informative vision of God's glory as he reigns in heaven. Many other chapters considered among the Bible's greatest – Psalm 23, Isaiah 53, and Romans 8 – focus on the vital subject of what God has done and continues to do for our salvation. But Revelation 4 presents us with God himself in the radiant glory of his enthroned being. G. B. Caird calls it a vision “of omnipotent majesty,” “a mystery to be explored only by the humility of worship.”¹

Those who grow in their awareness of God inevitably wish to see him more clearly. Moses pled, “Please show me your glory” (Ex. 33:18). God permitted him only to see the “back” of his glory (Ex. 33:23), which may be analogous to the symbolic vision given in Revelation 4. This vision of divine splendor is probably the closest we will come on this side of heaven to seeing the majesty of God with our eyes.

The question is inevitably raised as to whether or not this vision, conveyed through words, shows what God and heaven “really” look like. The answer is that, like all apocalyptic literature, Revelation presents reality in the form of symbols. Later in Revelation, Satan will be depicted as a dragon and the persecuting Antichrist as a beast.

¹ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (San Francisco: Harper, 1966), 63.

These are symbols, not photographs, yet they show what Satan and his servants “really” are like. Likewise, we would not see God and heaven more clearly if the symbols could be replaced with the kind of unmediated vision that God told Moses is impossible to man (Ex. 33:20). Psalm 104:2 says God clothes himself “with light as with a garment,” not to conceal but to reveal himself to us. We may be sure that John literally saw the things recorded in this vision, symbols designed to make visible the invisible God: God’s jewel-refracted throne, the emerald rainbow, the four living creatures, and the enthroned elders. This symbolic vision shows the reality of how God chooses to display the glory of his countenance, in a clearer and more radiant form perhaps than anywhere else in the Bible.

GREAT THEMES IN REVELATION 4

In order to plumb some of the greatness of this chapter, let me point out some themes that should enflame our minds. The first impression we should glean from this vision is the surpassing preeminence and majesty of God. There is nothing more important or interesting than God. There is no subject so mind- and soul-expanding as God. There is no earthly pastime that should loosen the grip of our imagination from the wonder of contemplating God’s glory.

One way to approach the preeminence of God is to understand the Hebrew word for “glory.” The basic meaning of the word *kabod* is “weighty.” The point is that God is consequential: a heavyweight, not a lightweight. God is infinitely substantial, the very opposite of chaff that blows in the wind. Philip Ryken writes: “No one has more influence. No one has a higher position or a weightier reputation. No one is more deserving of honor, recognition and praise.”²

As Revelation 4 presents the weighty preeminence of God, we face one of the chief ailments of Christianity today. In assessing American evangelicalism, David Wells has commented on “the weightlessness of God.” Wells explains that to professing Christians “God has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable.”³ Wells does not mean that something has

² Philip G. Ryken, *Discovering God in Stories from the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 16.

³ David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 88-90.

happened to God, but rather to our attitude toward him. In the place of God, man sees himself upon the throne. Even Christians today are preoccupied not with knowing God and his will but with matching our own preferences and suiting our own needs.

If evangelicals are disinterested with God, postmodern spirituality has an especially weightless view of deity. Wells cites Sheila Larson, who answered a survey by describing her religion as “Sheilaism.” This faith has no church but consists of her own personal religion. Where does Sheila find the truths of Sheilaism? She answers, “Just my own little voice.” Wells comments that for postmoderns “the self becomes the main form of reality” and the self “is what life is about.”⁴

When we turn back to Revelation 4, its vision of God in his majesty smashes any pretensions to self-derived religion. The fact that the four living creatures have “eyes all around” and six wings each (Rev. 4:8) is surely related to God’s supremacy. The cherubim have been everywhere and seen everything. Their sublime intelligence has concluded that God is to be the chief subject of our interest and the sole object of our worship. Seeing God enthroned in glory, we can only follow the twenty-four elders by falling on our faces (v. 10), casting any crowns of ours at his feet, singing, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power” (Rev. 4:11).

A second impression we gain from this vision is the right longing of the human heart for glory. Christians sometimes see the Bible’s call to humility as opposed to a wholesome craving for glory. In fact, man was made for glory. We were designed to be glory-seekers. This is why people exult in movie stars and sports icons. Certainly, the glorification of entertainment and sports *idols* is appropriately named: it is idolatry to grant the status of god or goddess to any creature. But the quest for glory itself is implanted in the human heart by God in order to be satisfied by none other than God himself. People marvel at how thousands are religiously drawn to stadiums to cheer ecstatically for a long touchdown pass or pack into the arenas for a music concert. The reason is that we crave even a fleeting earthly experience of the glory for which we were made. Yet the only true glory is found in the person of God and in his saving works.

⁴ David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 150-153.

Christians should not only repudiate idolatry, but should also open our hearts to the glory of God. This is the picture we see in Revelation 4. Blazing at the center of creation is the transcendent splendor of the glorious God. In John's vision this majesty has enthralled both the twenty-four elders and the angelic myriads surrounding them. Revelation holds before us an exalted vision of heaven's glory and we impoverish ourselves if we do not frequently refresh our souls in meditation on the splendors of our God.

In a memorable essay, *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis noted that believers are presently on the outside of the glory we see reflected in nature. But he urges us to look on nature's lesser glory – the blazing sunrise or the burning autumn leaves – and realize that soon we will be within the true glory they signal. We should, Lewis says, “take the imagery of Scripture seriously, [and] believe that God will one day *give* us the Morning Star and cause us to *put on* the splendor of the sun.” We see the echoes of a coming glory in the beauty of nature, yet we cannot now “mingle with the splendours we see.” But, he adds:

all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in... [we] will put on... that greater glory of which Nature is only the first sketch... Nature is mortal; we shall outlive her. When all the suns and nebulae have passed away, each one of you will still be alive... We are summoned to pass in through Nature, beyond her, into that splendor which she fitfully reflects.⁵

The third impression I would suggest from Revelation 4 pertains to the beauty that is so integral to this vision. Notice that the sights of this vision are surpassingly beautiful and, no doubt, the angel voices, together with the twenty-four elders, excel the loveliness of any sound heard on earth. All this reminds Christians to value and cultivate the triad of virtue: the good, the true, and the beautiful.

It is a shame that in their fervor to distance themselves from Roman Catholicism many heirs of the Reformation set themselves against visual beauty, especially in the worship of God. But how out of place is such an attitude in light of the worship of heaven seen in this chapter. Medieval Christians built cathedrals to draw the mind upward to God; one cannot enter one of the ancient sanctuaries of

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 16-17.

Europe without feeling reverence and awe. Today, evangelicals build “worship centers” for the convenience of the “audience,” drawing our eyes horizontally to the people around us rather than to God above.

The Second Commandment condemns the making of “a carved image, or any likeness” for the sake of bowing down to it (Ex. 20:4-5). Many Reformed Christians interpret this as a repudiation of all visual imagery in worship. They fail to note, however, that while there were to be no images of God himself, God commanded that images of great beauty should adorn the tabernacle, including the golden cherubim atop the ark of the covenant and a variety of nature images recalling the Garden of Eden (Ex. 25-28). Clearly, then, God has not forbidden visual beauty in places of worship, since he has designed for beauty to provoke worship. We are encouraged all through the Bible, especially in Revelation, to cultivate beauty in our worship: visually through worship spaces designed to lift up the soul to God and audibly through music that adorns God’s Word with beautiful sounds. The most important form of beauty for Christians to cultivate is “the beauty of holiness” (Ps. 29:2, KJV), reflecting back to God the loveliness of his own character as he has formed it in our hearts.

It surely is not by chance that the secularist postmodern society in which we live is resolve to mar beauty of all kinds, including the beauty of the human form. There can be little doubt that many youths today cover their bodies with tattoos and body piercings as an outward expression of a barrenness they feel in their hearts. Christians must therefore not only cultivate true and godly beauty in the things we make and do, but we must also communicate the beauty and value of people who were made in God’s image. Revelation 4, reminds us that we are a race designed by God to bear the image of the beauty seen in this vision, in our bodies, our character, our relationships, our deeds, and especially in our worship.

WHAT WORSHIP IS

When we think of worship, Christians should realize our great need for biblical models for honoring God. One episode that reveals our need for instruction is recorded in Exodus 32. The tribes of Israel, gathered at Mount Sinai, wanted to hold a festival of honor and celebration for the Lord. They therefore brought their gold and

jewels to Aaron, the high priest, and in accordance with their wishes he made a golden calf for them to worship. It is important for us to realize that this was not the worship of a false god but a false attempt to worship the true God. According to the desires and folly of their own hearts, the golden calf was cast for the worship of the Lord (Ex. 32:1-5). God responded with wrathful judgments on his people who worshiped according to their own designs.

Revelation 4 provides insights into the worship of God in heaven. Its most basic principle is that worship is praise in response to God's revelation of himself. We see this in the worship of the four living creatures, who "day and night never cease" giving praise to God (Rev. 4:8). In our study of these angelic beings, we noted that with their faces of a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle, they represent all the classes of living beings on earth. As such, their worship exhibits, as G.K. Beale puts it, "the function that all creation is meant to fulfill... to praise God for his holiness and glorify him for his work of creation." Like the four living creatures, the whole of creation pours forth praise to God unceasingly, day and night without end. The cherubim are joined by the twenty-four elders who "represent the purpose of redeemed humanity, which is to praise and glorify God."⁶

When we use the English word *worship* there are two important things we should notice. The first is that it is a transitive, not an intransitive verb. This means that worship must always have a direct object. Many people state that they are "just worshiping." But we always worship someone or something. In many churches today, the worship service is designed with the unbelieving visitors in mind or to appeal to the tastes of the congregation. True Christian worship, however, has only one target audience: the glorious God enthroned in heaven. True worship is summarized in Revelation 5:13 as being directed to "him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb," giving "blessing and honor and glory and might" to our God. While visitors and the congregation are blessed by true worship, Douglas Kelly rightly argues that the most important principle is that Christian worship "ought to be centered on God. It ought to celebrate God. It ought to turn people's hearts toward God. It ought to lift them out of their selves towards God... The power and the glory, the strength and the

⁶ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 332.

life of a worship service is to celebrate God, to center on him.”⁷ This is precisely what the four living beings and the twenty-four enthroned elders are doing in Revelation 4.

Second, we should note that *worship* come from an older word that was *worship*. To worship God is to acclaim his worth-ship: we praise God because he is worthy of our adoration. For this reason we see in this vision that God is worshiped for the glory of his attributes. Revelation highlights three attributes of God, which are celebrated in the worship of the cherubim: God’s holiness, power, and eternity.

The worship of the four living creatures highlights the *holiness* of God: “they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy’” (Rev. 4:8). This scene echoes the angelic worship shown in Isaiah 6. We earlier compared the four living beings to the cherubim of Ezekiel 1, but they are also like the worshiping seraphim of Isaiah’s vision, bearing six wings and singing what is known as the *trishagion*, “Holy, holy, holy.” In the Bible, repetition marks special emphasis, and of all God’s attributes only holiness receives threefold repetition. Holiness is God’s transcendent separation above all creation and is his preeminent attribute. Jesus addressed God as “Holy Father” (Jn. 17:11) and taught as our first petition in prayer, “hallowed by your name” (Mt. 6:9). Geerhardus Vos wrote: “In Jehovah’s holiness his divinity as it were concentrates itself. It is exalted above the possibility of sin – in him, as the absolutely good, evil cannot enter.”⁸ Because of God’s holiness, Moses removed his shoes before the burning bush. We should likewise worship the holy God in reverence and awe.

The living creatures also praise God’s *power*, calling him “Lord God Almighty” (Rev. 4:8). “Almighty” is the Greek word *pantokrator*, a title falsely employed by the Caesars. Yet it is God alone who is truly omnipotent and thus able to save. Stephen Charnock wrote: “How vain would be his eternal counsels, if power did not step in to execute them. His mercy would be a feeble pity, if he were destitute of power to relieve; and his justice a slighted scarecrow, without power to punish; his promises an empty sound, without power to accomplish them.”⁹ A. W. Pink adds: “God’s power is like Himself: infinite, eternal, incomprehensible: it can neither be checked, restrained, nor

⁷ Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 103.

⁸ Geerhardus Vos: *Grace & Glory* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1922, reprint 1994), 269

⁹ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1853, reprint 1996), 2:15.

frustrated by the creature.”¹⁰ We can imagine how this praise to God’s power would have encouraged the churches to which John was writing, as they were about to enter a time of persecution and testing.

The third attribute for which God is praised is his *eternity*: “who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8). God’s eternity emphasizes his sovereign control, since he is before and after all things. William Barclay comments: “Empires might come and empires might go; God lasts forever. Here is the triumphant affirmation that God endures unchanging amid the enmity and the rebellion of human beings.”¹¹

God is not only praised for what he is but also for what he does. Chapter 5 will praise God for his redeeming work in Christ. Chapter 4 praises God for the glory of his work as Creator. We see this in the worship of the twenty-four elders, representing the redeemed church: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11). God made and even now upholds all that there is, and for this he is rightly to be praised.

When we look into the starry sky we see a panoply of praise to God’s glory, just as Psalm 8:1 declared, “You have set your glory above the heavens.” Among the starry host are entire galaxies, shining as one because they are so distant. With the aid of telescopes, our eyes can see millions and billions of stars and galaxies. Our own galaxy, the Milky Way, contains at least 200 billion stars and rotates majestically in space, spanning over 700,000 trillion miles. The God who reveals himself to us in the Bible and sent his Son to make an atoning death for our sin is the God who made this glorious universe and sustains it now in accordance with his will. James Boice comments: “The saints in heaven praise God for the wonders of his creation. Shouldn’t we, who are part of that creation, do so also in our worship?”¹²

When we consider how great is God’s glory as Creator, we remember why our praise is given to him alone. The Christians of the first century refused to acclaim Caesar as God, suffering death for their devotion to Christ as Lord. So must Christians today refuse to bow before the idols of our age. Craig Keener writes: “God alone is God, and he alone merits first place – beyond every other love, every other

¹⁰ A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 46.

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976, 2004), 178.

¹² James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 14:9.

anxiety, every other fear that consumes us.”¹³ Indeed, the logic of Revelation suggests that the best way to keep ourselves from idolatry is to gathering with fellow believers to praise the holy, almighty, and eternal Creator God.

WHAT WORSHIPERS DO

Having seen what worship is from John’s vision of heaven, we should conclude with observations about what worshipers do. There are three things the four living creatures and the enthroned elders show us. First, their example urges us to *humble* ourselves in the presence of the holy, almighty, and eternal God.

The humility of the four living creatures is suggested by their six wings. This points back to Isaiah’s vision of the seraphim, who used two wings to cover their faces, two to cover their feet, and two to fly (Isa. 6:2). Why would these angels cover their faces? The answer is humbly to show how much more glorious is the brightness of God even compared to their own glory. Moreover, by covering their feet they bore testimony to their creaturely humility. We also see humility in the elders, who “fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever” (Rev. 4:10). When God is lifted up, human pride is always cast down, and so it should be in worship. This is why, whether or not we are able physically to kneel in the presence of God, our hearts ought always to be prostrate before him, especially in gathered worship. The Bible says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” (Ja. 4:10).

Second, God’s people *rejoice* in worshiping him. This attitude is urged throughout the psalms. Psalm 97:12 pleads: “Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!” We can infer joy in Revelation 4 through the songs the worshipers were singing. These are the first of the many hymns recorded in Revelation, all of which joyfully celebrate the glory of God’s person and works, especially as he saves his beleaguered people. Like them, congregational singing in praise to God should be one of our chief joys this side of heaven. Boice writes: “Music is a gift from God that allows us to express our deepest heart responses to God and his truth in meaningful and memorable ways. It is a case of our hearts joining

¹³ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 182.

with our minds to say, ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ to the truths we are embracing.”¹⁴

Lastly, those who worship God *confess* him as Savior and Lord. When George Frederick Handel’s *Messiah* was performed in 1743, England’s King George II gave his confession by standing for the Hallelujah Chorus, beginning a tradition that continues today. He rose with head bowed to confess that while he was sovereign of England, Jesus Christ is King of kings, the Messiah who reigns forever and ever.

The twenty-four elders gave their confession by “cast[ing] their crowns before the throne, saying, ‘Worthy are you, our Lord and God’” (Rev. 4:10-11). They were acclaiming their submission to God as the only true sovereign. They were confessing that any glory of their own as Christ’s people has come from God and is for his praise only. How exciting it is for Christians to realize that, by God’s grace in Christ, we are in this life gaining crowns to cast at his feet, adding the testimony of our lives to the praise of the entire creation forever.

One day each of us will stand before God. If you are not a Christian, cleansed from your sin by the redeeming blood of Christ, you will hear God’s dreadful pronouncement of your guilt and eternal punishment. If you are a believer in Christ, you will rejoice to hear God’s admission into the holy courts of eternal praise in heaven. Will you have a crown to lay at God’s feet on that day? Surely, we will realize then what now so few seem to know: that our chief end and our greatest blessing is to live for the praise of God forever and be able to say, with rejoicing in our hearts, “To God alone be all the glory!”

¹⁴ Boice, *Revelation*, 14:2.