

# Heavenly Worship

**Scripture: Rev 4**

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Evening Service**

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People of God: What are we doing here, in this time of worship? What might a visitor, who has never attended a worship service before, what might such a person think about what we're doing here tonight? He'll see about 25 to 30 people coming together in a place that can easily hold 300 and more. If he could look into our hearts, he'll detect a variety of different motives. Some have come out of duty; others out of custom; still others, because mom or dad made them.

He'll hear us sing some songs, with music that will be very different than the top 40 songs on the radio. At times, the singing goes very well; at other times, we'll struggle with the tune. Then the people will listen to a lengthy message based upon a very ancient book that no one can read in the original language. During this time, some might take a few notes, others might doodle; and perhaps even one or two nod off.

We might think the morning service might be more impressive. At least, there will be more people there. But the same dynamics will be work. The person, who, supposedly, is at the center of attention, God, isn't even physically present. And the excitement level pales in comparison to any sporting event. Nor does much seem to change—either in the people attending and definitely not in the world, as the real movers and shakers are the politicians, the corporate CEOs and the celebrities, whose lives fill the media. Who hears about Sunday worship in tomorrow's papers?

Worship might not seem like an earth shattering event. It might not seem to be a radical, daring activity to do. But what if we view worship on earth in the light of its heavenly counterpart? What if our worship is a mirror, a reflection, even a participation of the worship that takes place in heaven? Would that change our perspective on worship and its impact upon,

not just our lives, but upon the world in which we live? What does this scene of heavenly worship, described in Revelation 4, seek to convey?

As we turn to this chapter, we sense an immediate change from chapters two and three. Those chapters focused on churches here on earth. Now we are transported to what's going on in heaven. Before we dealt with details that reflected the history and geography of the first-century, but now we are in the midst of visions and descriptions that are difficult to relate to.

And indeed, we are dealing with visions, where symbolism and figurative language dominates. John, through the Spirit, is able to get a glimpse of the heavenly side of things. He gets a peek into what otherwise would be barred from human sight. Only a few before him, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel, come to mind, are privileged to see things, about which we would be otherwise totally ignorant.

And in mentioning these OT prophets, there are some parallels between what they see and what they hear. (Ezekiel One in particular comes to mind). But I will not attempt to compare them, let alone harmonize them. I do not have the time to do that. Nor would it be helpful. After all, each vision needs to be understood in its own context.

And in Revelation Four the center of attention is the Throne of God. We'll soon be introduced to the 24 elders sitting on their 24 thrones and then to the four living creatures, and we're all curious as to what they might mean and we can lose sight of the fact that the center of attention is the Throne in the center. The 24 elders and the 4 living creatures surround the throne, not to take away from the glory and majesty of the center Throne, but in order to keep our focus there. After all, the 4 living creatures and the 24 elders are engaged in the worship of the One who sits upon the Throne.

Perhaps we quickly want to move on the elders and living creatures, because we know about the One on the Throne. It's God, of course. And you're right. But it is interesting that this is never directly stated. This is implied by the descriptions of the throne, as well as by the songs that are sung. But God himself is not directly named, or more precisely, God is never described. Only his glory.

And that makes sense. God is—well, God. He cannot be described as if he was a created being, like you or I, or even an angelic being. That's why God issued the second commandment: We cannot make a graven image of God, because no image could ever capture who God is. And so, when John encounters the One upon the Throne, he doesn't dare begin to describe him. He, instead, describes the effects.

His appearance was like that of jasper and carnelian, two precious stones, whose brilliance, portray the majesty of God. It's as if the light that

shines from God so blinds us from actually seeing him, we just see the light. Like when you encounter a car at night, with the high beams on. You don't see the car, just the light. So it is with John's encounter with God.

"A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne." The rainbow, of course, reminds us of God's faithfulness to the creation, when he made the covenant with Noah and the creation to uphold this world.

"From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder." Here, we are reminded of God's display of power and might when he revealed himself at Mount Sinai. The Psalms often use this language to describe God's power to deliver his people. Thunder is also a way of describing the voice of God.

"Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God." Here we are reminded of the work and power of God through the Holy Spirit. The seven spirits, a phrase we dealt with in the opening chapter, describes the fullness and completeness of the Spirit.

"Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal." Now you know where the phrase, "by the Sea of Crystal" comes from. (It appears again in chapter 15). In the OT temple, there was a large reservoir of water, used for cleansing. It was called the Sea. Now in this heavenly temple we have a Sea of Crystal. It heightens the separateness of God.

And so, all of these descriptions of the Throne are not intended to give us a physical description of what God actually looks like—because that is impossible. Instead, they describe the effects of God. They grab our attention. They force us to keep the Throne front and center. God, and God alone, is the focus of this scene of heavenly worship.

That needs to be kept in mind as we turn to the 24 elders and the four living creatures that surround the throne. "Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads." These 24 elders appear throughout the Book of Revelation, but who are they?

There are two main options proposed. One is that they are an exalted angelic order. The angels do have different classes or levels. The elders could be one of them. Others suggest that the 24 elders represent the church of both the Old and New Testament, reflecting the 12 tribes of the OT and the 12 apostles of the NT.

In my mind, it doesn't have either-or; but includes both ideas. I do not think the 24 elders are the actual 12 sons of Jacob or the actual 12 apostles. But they—a special class of angelic beings—do serve to represent them.

They represent the one church, of the old and new covenants, emphasizing the unity of God's people.

Again, it needs to be stressed that the presence of the 24 elders is to keep us focused on the One who sits on the Throne. Throughout the Book of Revelation, they give praise and adoration to God. We'll get to their specific song of praise in this chapter, shortly.

But before we do that, we need to deal with the four living creatures. "In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings." What in the world do we make of these creatures?

Again, they are a unique group of angelic beings. But why four? Why this description? What was their task? Four in the ancient world was a number for creation; after all, the ancient world spoke about the four winds, the four corners of the earth, and the four elements. They're still used today. And so the four living creatures represent the entire created order. That's why they are depicted as they are: Here we have the noblest creature in the lion, the strongest in the ox, the wisest in the man, and the swiftest in the eagle. They represent the created order.

They have six wings so that they can move quickly and in any direction, doing the bidding of the One upon the Throne. They are also covered with eyes, so that they can keep watch over what is going on. In this way, the four living creatures act as royal guardians for the Throne of God. But most importantly, as representatives of the entire created order they worship the One upon the Throne.

In this chapter, we have the beginning of many songs of worship. Revelation is full of worship songs. It is the Psalter of the NT. What is it that the four living creatures sing?

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.

Here we have an echo of what Isaiah heard in heaven. This song of the four living creatures focuses on the attributes of God. It praises God simply for who he is. A holy God. An almighty God. A sovereign God. An eternal God. For simply who God is, God is worshipped.

This worship of the living creatures is echoed by the 24 elders. They too sing a song of praise:

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 song builds upon the first song. While the first focuses on who God is, this one praises God for his act of creation. He has created all things. He continues to uphold the creation. Because of that, God is worshipped.

Do you see the scene before us? At the center the One who sits upon the Throne. He is surrounded by the heavenly host, and in particular by the elders, who represent God's people throughout the ages, and by the living creatures, representing the entire created order. Together, God's people and the creation, through their representatives give praise to God for who he is and what he has done as the Creator.

This is heavenly worship. The focus is on God. Even the 24 elders and four living creatures, impressive though they are, focus their attention on God and worship him, for who he is and what he has done.

This heavenly worship is a pattern for all worship here on earth. All worship here on earth is (or at least should be) a participation of this heavenly worship. Doesn't that provide a whole different appreciation for what we are doing at this present moment?

What we are doing here this evening might not seem like much in the eyes of the world. We're just a small group of people singing, praying, and listening. Not much to that. But what we are doing is part of something larger and bigger than even we can imagine. We are reflecting this heavenly worship. We are joining the 24 elders and the 4 living creatures in giving praise to God.

The church at worship is centered and gathered at God's throne. God is the center of attention. God addresses us and we respond to him. That's the basic framework of our liturgy. We worship him for who he and what he has done.

Can you imagine what an encouragement this must have been to the churches to whom Jesus wrote? Churches that were being persecuted. Churches dealing with false teachers and immoral practices. Churches that were on the outside of the mainstream. But they were doing something, no one else could. They were reflecting and participating in this heavenly worship.

And as they worshiped the One upon the Throne, they were reminded of who he is and what he has done. He is the Holy One. He is the Sovereign One. He is the Creator of all. No wonder, representatives of God's people and of the entire created order bow down and worship him. No wonder, we too are called to worship our God and our Creator. Amen.