

“A Glimpse Behind the Door”
Revelation 4:1-5:5
September 16, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

We're looking at four commitments the Bible calls for from all of Jesus' followers. We are called to be a worshiping, learning, loving and serving community of people. We have started by looking at worship, because all the others are both pointless and impossible without this. If we are not first of all a worshiping community, we lose both the focus and the power to sustain the others. Take service as an example. We serve by telling and showing others that Jesus is wonderful. But if we have lost the sense of that wonder in our own hearts, we will soon lose the ability to show and tell others of it.

Someone has said that Americans tend to worship their work, work at their play, and play at their worship. The Bible's view is that there is nothing more fundamental than our worship. We were created to be worshiping creatures, and we find our deepest longings met only when we are worshiping the true God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Revelation 4-5 is a lengthy description of the kind of vibrant worship that exists in heaven. John begins chapter four with this intriguing image of a door standing open in heaven. God is revealing to us something we have always wanted to know—what is heaven really like? We are invited by God himself this morning to stand at that open door and take a good long look at what is going on in heaven. What we find there is that heaven is dominated by the activity of worship. So I would like to propose that we look this morning at the worship of heaven, and find in it the pattern for our own worship. Chapter four describes for us the God-centered nature of all worship, and chapter five the drama of worship. Let's look at both of these and learn to pattern our worship after what we see here.

I. The God-Centered Nature of Worship

The scene John describes to us is dominated by a throne that is in the middle of heaven. Everything else is oriented toward this throne, which is the central focus of heaven. John describes for us the presence in heaven of the 24 elders and the four creatures, but their focus is on the throne which lies at the center of heaven. The throne, very clearly, is the place where the triune God reigns. To say that God is at the center of heaven's worship will seem to many of you a case of stating the obvious. Of course God is to be at the center of our worship. But it is very easy to center our worship around us and our needs rather than God. Someone told me last week of an advertisement they had heard about a church that said it was “the church you've always wanted.” I'll be honest with you, I'm so glad God has not given me the church I've always

wanted. That church would have me on the throne instead of Jesus. Our whole problem is that sin has so gripped us that we want the wrong things. We want church to be all about us and not about God. The real question is not about the kind of church we want, but the kind of church we need. What we need is a church where God-centered worship is present.

The book of Revelation was written to a church encountering suffering and persecution. The apostle John, author of the book, had been exiled to the island of Patmos, a type of prison. The church was like a little boat taking on water in a stormy sea. The real power seemed to be with the Roman government, and they were not being too friendly to the followers of Jesus. How would this church survive? God's answer is to open to them the door of heaven and let them see the throne in heaven. This symbol of the throne occurs more than 40 times in the book of Revelation, teaching us of God's sovereign control over this world. The late Leslie Newbigin was once asked whether he was optimistic or pessimistic about some issue. He replied, "I'm neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead." We don't know whether good or bad things will happen. Mostly bad things were happening to the church in the day these words were written. I was reading this week in Acts 12, where it is recorded that Herod arrested two apostles who had been in Jesus' inner circle, James and Peter. James was executed and Peter was miraculously delivered. We don't know whether good or bad things will happen to us, but we do know that a good God is running things. When we battle the fears of life, when we are overcome by the 2:00 a.m. anxieties, the kind that seem darkest at that quiet hour when most are asleep, our need is to see the throne in heaven and to worship God.

The two groups portrayed here as worshiping God are the 24 elders and the four creatures. Before we take a look at some of the detailed descriptions of these two groups, I need to explain something about the type of literature this is. It is called "apocalyptic" literature, from the Greek word that is the first word of this book. It is translated "revelation" in most versions, and has become the name we give this book. Apocalyptic literature is the kind that comes from God-given visions. What we read in this book is John's report of visions he was given. Parts of Daniel and Ezekiel are Old Testament examples of the same kind of literature. This genre features these wild images like the creatures full of eyes and with wings and different faces. They are meant to be interpreted more symbolically than literally. Think of them more as artistic renderings. The reason for this non-literal use of imagery is that our need is not just to know that Jesus is on his throne, but to feel it deep inside.

I want to point out two things we learn from the creatures and the elders about God-centered worship. First, we learn from the four creatures of the four demands this worship makes of us. The lion is known for his courage, and if we are to worship God we need to have the courage to bring our true selves to him. Where there is a cowardly covering up of our sin, there is no true

worship. The ox is known for the strength of his service. A second element that must be present in the true worship of God is a certain strength, seen especially in some of the mundane aspects of worship. There is a need in worship to plow new ground, learn new songs, and diligently prepare for worship. In short, one aspect of worship feels something like the ox going up and down the rows of the field pulling the plow. It may not be glamorous, but it is necessary. The third creature has the appearance of a man, who is the most intelligent of all God's creatures. True worship must have an intellectual component. The mind must be engaged to understand what God has said to us. Finally, the last creature has the appearance of an eagle, the swiftest of God's creatures. I think that speaks to us of the necessity of being quick to apply what God tells us in his word. So if we are to worship God, we must have courage to be honest, strength to be faithful in the mundane parts of worship, a willingness to engage our intellect, and a readiness to apply what God says to us.

We learn secondly from the elders and the creatures that God-centered worship is to be characterized both by light and heat. There is always a learning, intellectual side to worship. The four creatures are covered with eyes, **"all around and within"** (4:8). They see God more clearly than others, with the result that they engage in non-stop worship. **"Day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'"** (4:8).

But light should always lead to heat, to passion. Worship that has light without heat becomes dead orthodoxy. Heat without light becomes mere sentimentality. True worship must address both the understanding and the heart. We see that especially with these elders, who do something very un-elder-like. They **"fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne"** (4:10). What is meant by casting these crowns before the throne? A crown is a symbol of ruling. In Bible days, kings wore crowns as symbols of their authority. As followers of Jesus, we are given authority to rule this earth as God's representatives. Paul says that the saints will be the ones to judge the world (1 Cor. 6:2). So our passage portrays Jesus' people doing two things: ruling and worshiping. But notice which one is more central. They give up their ruling in order to worship. Or to say it differently, worship is more central to who we are than is work. Your highest use is not work but worship. The worship of God will change your values. It's like a homeowner who attempts to have the perfect lawn. He spends a great deal of time in the effort to have the nicest lawn in the neighborhood, sometimes even neglecting his family in the pursuit of the perfect lawn. Then his 8-year old daughter gets very sick and must go into the hospital. His world is rocked, and his lawn means nothing to him anymore. These 24 elders encountered the God who sits on the throne, and their values changed. Everything else became secondary.

One of the questions I have heard from very honest church members, usually children, is to wonder, if heaven is to be all about the worship of God, how can it be that we won't be eternally bored. Heaven is envisioned as a never-ending church service—sermons and singing as far as the eye can see. The answer is that it is the God-centered nature of worship that delivers it from boredom. Heavenly worship will not be boring because God is not boring. The same is true of our worship here on earth. Ironically, the man-centered goal of non-boring worship becomes a way to have boring worship. Our worship becomes truly exciting as it centers on the God who sits on the throne.

II. The Drama of Worship

Chapter 5 is one of the more dramatic chapters of the book, centering on this scroll that has been sealed with seven seals. I interpret this scroll to refer to the plan of God for bringing forth his kingdom, a kingdom of peace and joy for its subjects. Both sides of the scroll have been used for writing, indicating that God's plan cannot be added to or taken away from. But there's a problem. No one is found who can open the scroll. In the Biblical view of things, to open the scroll is to execute what is written there. Words are not just symbolic marks on a page, but have with them the power to make so the things that are written. So when we read that no one is able to open the scroll, it means that no one is able to bring about the plan of God for the bringing in of his kingdom. All seems hopeless, and John weeps tears of despair. But just when things seem to be at their worst, a light dawns. One of the elders tells him that the time for weeping is past, because there is a hero on the horizon. It is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. He is able to bring about God's kingdom, and he does so as **“a Lamb standing as though it had been slain.”** This Lamb has seven horns, indicating perfect power, and seven eyes, indicating perfect wisdom.

This is the basic narrative of all time. Even today, a good story is marked by these same elements. There is a noble task to be undertaken, one that will bring great benefit to many. But then obstacles appear, and the great undertaking seems doomed to failure. And then at just the last moment, when things seem about as dark as they can be, a hero emerges who saves the day. That's the drama that is repeated in each of our lives, and lies at the center of our worship. Point 1 – everyone longs for a kingdom of peace and joy to be personally experienced. Deep within is a sense that we were created for something bigger than ourselves, something glorious and deeply satisfying. Point 2 – after attempting to bring in this kingdom through a variety of means (money, work, appearance, children), there is nothing but failure. **“No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth”** is able to do it. Despair sets in, until we see the Lion who is lamb-like. Point 3 – Jesus is the Lamb, and he brings the kingdom through his sacrifice as the Lamb of God. Only one who is both

all powerful as the Lion, and also the one who dies for sin as the Lamb can bring in the kingdom.

This will help you to live a life of worship in two ways. First, it will enable you to tell the right story about your life. There is another story that is often told, and it is the rival story to the one in our passage. This rival story brings anger, despair, and ultimately death instead of life. Point 1 of this rival story says that I deserve special treatment because I am really at the center of things. I am special and should be treated accordingly. But in Point 2, a problem enters into this me-centered paradise. Very few others have heard and received the news that I am to be at the center of all things. Some of them have even gone beyond ignoring me and have actually hurt me and treated me cruelly. Point 3 rivals the true story by introducing a hero. But when the true hero is rejected, the only one left is me. I am the hero of my own story. My heroic efforts either force everyone to respect me and treat me as I think I deserve, or if that fails, I become a type of heroic victim. Have you ever had that experience where you have a conflict with someone, perhaps a spouse, and you go away and stew about the conflict? As you rehearse the conflict in your mind, if you're like me, you subtly rewrite the story so that you are either the hero or the victim. Such a story brings anger and despair. It is the wrong story to tell. True worship requires that we tell ourselves the right story.

Second, not only must we tell the right story, but we must locate ourselves in that story. All of us are somewhere in this drama. Perhaps we are at the place of trying to bring in the peace and joy of the kingdom through some means like money or good looks. Or maybe we are weeping in despair because it's not working. If so, you need to hear the words of verse 5. **“Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”** Without Jesus, there will be only weeping. With the Lamb of God, there is deliverance and joy. He can open the scroll and bring to your life God's kingdom of peace and joy. He does so as a sacrificial lamb. Our hero has won the victory through the sacrifice of his own life. But he has been raised from the dead, and now sits on the throne, where he receives all honor and glory. Will you place yourself in this story? You have a hero. Repent of being the heroic champion or the heroic victim. Jesus is the only true hero.

CONCLUSION:

Good worship is centered on Jesus. May God open our eyes that we may see his worthiness and fall down and worship him!