

# Worship

Cultivate: Time to Engage Series, September 17 & 18 | Revelation 4:1-11

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## What is worship, and why do we do it?

### **When I was a child, worship was a routine I went through every week.**

We sang three hymns each week.

There was a prelude, a pastoral prayer, a choir anthem, an offertory prayer, and a sermon.

We were almost always done right around noon. And I was usually watching my dad's watch because by that point I was hungry and ready to do something else.

It was just what we did. It was a routine. We did it every week.

### **That routine began to change when I was a teenager.**

I began to own my faith; it was mine, my faith in God.

That meant worship became something more to me.

There were so many moments along the way when worship gripped me in a new way.

One was when I went to my grandparents' church and took Communion. We went down to the front of the sanctuary and knelt at a bench to receive the elements. Something about that physical act helped me to grasp the enormity of what Jesus did to pay the price for my sin.

From that point forward, Communion took on a whole new level of immediacy to me.

Worship was becoming something more than a routine to me.

### **My experience leads us back to the question, "What is worship?" Let's try to define worship.**

Theologian Wayne Grudem gives a succinct, clear definition of worship, "Worship is the activity of glorifying God in his presence with our voices and hearts."<sup>1</sup>

Philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard gave a more expansive definition: "In worship we engage ourselves with, dwell upon, and express the greatness, beauty, and goodness of God through thought and the use of words, rituals, and symbols. We do this alone as well as in union with God's people. To worship is to see God as worthy, to ascribe great worth to him."<sup>2</sup>

### **As we turn to the Revelation today, we will come away with clearer answers to both of our questions.**

The Revelation, the last book of the Bible, is a book of prophecy and a book of worship!

It answers the question, "What is worship?" by modeling worship on an experiential level.

Plus, it gives us compelling answers to the question, "Why do we worship?"

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Intersity Press, 1994), 1003.

<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 177.

The Revelation leaves us with a fuller appreciation of what worship looks like and an urgency about worshipping here and now.

## The Revelation invites us into God's throne room.

### **In Revelation 4:1, we find that John is being given a vision of the future and of heaven:**

*After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."*

John is the author of the Revelation. In chapter one, we learn that John had been exiled to the island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor because he preached the Gospel, which was falling out of favor with the Roman authorities.

Revelation 1 begins by telling us that God is giving John a revelation of the future.

The risen and glorified Christ appeared to John one Sunday as John was worshipping.

Then, in **Revelation 1:19**, Jesus told John to write down this revelation:

*"Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this."*

In Revelation 1, John describes his vision of Jesus. This is "the things that you have seen."

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 include messages from Jesus to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Those are the things that are.

Now, in Revelation 4, we are getting to the things that are to take place "after this."

So, in Revelation 4, we are in the future, the beginning of God's plan for the end of history.

John sees a door open in heaven. He is invited to come up through the door. It's an invitation to step into the heavenly realm where Jesus promises to show John heaven and the future.

### **In Revelation 4:2-3, we see a throne and one seated on the throne.**

*At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.*

John was "in the Spirit," meaning that he was seeing a vision.

In the Spirit John was able to see that in heaven there is a throne.

The Lord is the one seated on the throne. John doesn't call him by name out of respect for the holiness of God.

Instead, John describes his appearance with analogies. He looks almost like precious stones radiating light. He is surrounded by a rainbow that also has the appearance of a jewel.

Isn't that a beautiful, overwhelming picture?

### **In Revelation 4:4-6, we see what is surrounding the throne.**

*Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.*

There are twenty-four additional thrones. On each throne is seated one of twenty-four elders. These elders themselves are clothed in pure-white garments, indicating their purification. They each have a crown, symbolizing victory and rule. There are multiple theories about whom these elders represent. Do they represent the twenty-four ranks of priests in the Old Testament? The twelve Apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel? The Church? They somehow represent God's people gathered before him.

The throne itself emanates lightning, rumbling, and thunder. Those sounds point us back to Exodus (19:16), when God appeared on the top of Mount Sinai to his people. There was lighting, thunder, and rumbling then too. God is present, and He is glorious and powerful.

Before the throne are seven lit torches. Together these seven torches represent the Holy Spirit.

Also, before the throne is a sea of glass that is as clear as crystal. The sea typically stands for chaos, so chaos is ordered in the presence of God, it is under his feet in a sense, and it is totally under control. It's another symbol of God's reign.

### **Then in Revelation 4:6-7, we meet more creatures in God's throne room.**

*... And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight.*

There are four living creatures. Creature number one is like a lion. Number two is like an ox. Number three has a face like a man on the body of an animal. Number four is like an eagle.

We will discover in verse eight that they each have six wings and that they have eyes not only on their fronts and backs but also within them meaning that they see everything, and they see God clearly. They behold His glory and majesty.

These are heavenly beings, and if we were to keep reading the Revelation, we would find that these living creatures are just the beginning of the beings in heaven.

### **God is surrounded by signs of divinity as King Charles III is now surrounded by signs of monarchy.**

Upon the recent death of his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, the Prince of Wales became King.

King Charles III as he is now known is surrounded by reminders of his royal power.

After becoming King, he came to London, to Buckingham Palace, a building designed to project royalty.

He frequently dresses in military uniforms designed to project royalty. Eventually, he will wear a crown and carry other items designed to project royalty. That's just the beginning of the signs of monarchy that now surround King Charles III regularly, reminding everyone that he is king.

In a similar way, God's throne room is filled with one reminder after another that He is God; He is holy, glorious, and majestic; He is in charge.

The Revelation shows us that worship is creation's right response to God's plan.

**In Revelation 4:8, the four living creatures proclaim the holiness of the triune God.**

*And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,*

*"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come!"*

The four living creatures proclaim that the one on the throne is the Lord God Almighty.

They tell us of His attributes. God is eternal, a fact reflected in the way the four living creatures proclaim that God is the one who was, who is, and who is to come. God is eternal.

The four living creatures praise God's holiness. They proclaim, "Holy, holy, holy." Proclaiming God's holiness three times intensifies what they are saying, God is REALLY holy. It is also a way of praising the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Holy, holy, holy is our triune God.

**Then in Revelation 4:9-11, the twenty-four elders join the four living creatures in worship.**

*And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders 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, saying,*

*"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."*

Whenever the living creatures worship God, the twenty-four elders worship as well.

The twenty-four elders fall down before the presence of the Lord and lay down their crowns. They are recognizing the overwhelming power and majesty of God plus his rule over them.

They proclaim God's worthiness. Because of God's being, character, and deeds, they assert that God is worthy of glory and honor and power.

**Let's look at the individual acts of worship.**

The living creatures see God clearly and proclaim his holiness, his rule, and other attributes.

The twenty-four elders fall down before God, acknowledging his sovereignty.

They cast their crowns before Him, acknowledging that He is the source of all good things and the one to whom all things belong.

The twenty-four elders praise God's worthiness because of who He is and what He has done.

This is just the beginning. It's the beginning of a worship service that continues into chapter five where God the Son is praised for his worthiness and accomplishments and where our triune God is praised for His plan to finally save His people, defeat His enemies, and build His Kingdom finally and forever.

**In these acts, creation is responding to God's person and plan.**

All of creation is represented here.

In the rainbow around God's throne, we have the skies proclaiming the greatness of God.

In the crystal sea we have the waters proclaiming the power of God.

In the living creatures, we have representatives of earthly creatures praising God: the lion symbolizes the wild animals, the ox symbolizes the domesticated animals, the human being represents all people, and the eagle stands for the birds of the air.

In the twenty-four elders we have the people of God praising him for who He is.

In coming chapters, all the angels of heaven and all the redeemed join their voices as well.

Everything God created is united in praising God for who He is and for his plan.

### **Why do we worship?**

Revelation 4 makes it clear that worship is creation's right response to God's plan.

It's just like Paul wrote in **Philippians 2:10-11**:

*... at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

### **Worship is our right response to God.**

#### **Let's review our two questions.**

We've started to answer the question, "What is worship?" Revelation 4 shows us what worship looks like. However, we still haven't answered the question, "Why do we worship?"

Revelation 4 depicts a point in the future.

It's clear why worship breaks out in Revelation 4.

God is on His throne, and these beings are in God's presence. If we were *there* in that room, of course we'd do the same thing those heavenly beings do. But we're not.

God's plan is unfolding dramatically. If we were *then* at that point in time, of course we'd praise God for His plan to save us unfolding in dramatic fashion.

But we're not *there* or *then*. Or are we?

#### **King Charles' accession council reminded us subtly that he is always on the throne.**

The Prince of Wales automatically became King when Queen Elizabeth II died.

However, that decision was ratified and confirmed in a later meeting of the Privy Council.

That meeting happened in the throne room at St. James' Palace.

You can see the throne in the background.

King Charles didn't sit on this throne. Nor will he ever spend much time actually on that throne.

However, King Charles is figuratively always on the throne. He is always king.

#### **Revelation 4 reminds us that God too is always on his throne.**

We get a glimpse into the heavenly throne room at a particular and important point in time. God's plan is beginning to unfold.

However, what we see in this moment is a reality that is true everywhere and always. God is always on His throne, always ruling, always sovereign, always Lord.

What we see in Revelation 4 is the nature of God.

And his plan is always “coming soon.” We are always called to be ready for Jesus to return. It could be at any moment! That’s what Jesus says over and over again.

We are, in a sense, *there* and *then*.

### **Therefore, worship is our right response to God.**

Revelation 4 doesn’t seek to give us a clear, well-reasoned argument for why we worship.

Instead, Revelation 4 serves as an urgent CALL to worship.

Revelation 4 serves to wake us from the ordinary time we live in, and to show us the nature of God, things as they truly are. We are living in the last days, God is on His throne, and God’s plans are in motion.

Revelation 4 calls us to proclaim the holiness of God, to fall down before Him, to acknowledge His sovereignty, and to join all of creation in praising His accomplishments and His plan for us.

God’s nature demands that we worship. We MUST worship.

Worship is our right response to God.

### **Let’s engage in worship.**

#### **Engaging in worship cultivates us as disciples.**

Notice what I didn’t say. I didn’t say that coming to worship cultivates us as disciples.

When we engage in worship as we see modelled in Revelation 4, we are shaped by the experience. The experience makes us into disciples.

#### **Engaging has become more difficult in the past season.**

In the past season, we were sent home. We learned to fear one another.

We started dividing from one another.

We cut important things out of our lives.

#### **In a sense, we’re all like “Bob” from *The Incredibles*.**

*The Incredibles* is a classic Disney-Pixar movie about a family of superheroes.

There’s the dad, Bob, who’s super strong. Mom is super-flexible. The teenager daughter can become invisible and put up force fields. The son is super-fast.

The whole family is in hiding, and dad is working a boring, dead-end job.

One night conflict erupts at the dinner table. The two super-powered kids are fighting, and mom is trying to stop them. Meanwhile, Bob, the dad, is standing at the counter, oblivious to what’s going on, reading the newspaper, thinking about his dead-end life.

That’s when the mom says, “Bob! It’s time to engage. Do something!”

Well, Bob, it’s time to engage!

#### **Let’s engage in worship regularly.**

Our patterns for worshipping are changing.

Many of us worship with other Christians sporadically, often as little as once a month.

There is something critically important about worshipping together on a weekly basis.

**Hebrews 10:24-25** warns us about this tendency:

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

To do what the Bible is telling us will require that we reorder some of our priorities, and I recognize that this is not always easy. But worship is important. It's biblical.

Let's engage in worship regularly.

### **Let's engage in worship in person.**

There are many reasons why you may choose to join us online. If you're new to Valley, if you're on vacation, if you're sick, if you're unable to reach Avon, I understand that online is your way to worship. However, there is power in proximity. We work hard to make online worship a good experience, but worshipping in person is a better, richer, fuller experience.

If you can get here, it's time to engage in worship in person.

### **Let's engage in worship vibrantly.**

There are so many ways we can worship.

We can worship reluctantly because we were forced to come.

We can worship passively because we want someone else to do the work for us.

Or we can worship vibrantly because it's what we want to do. We have been redeemed by God, gripped by His goodness, included in His mission, and caught up in His plan.

The population of heaven is our model. They proclaimed His virtues, fell down before Him, cast their crowns to Him, and sang.

That's what worship is supposed to be like.

### **Let's engage in worship.**