

Text: Revelation 4:1-11

“And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”” (Revelation 4:9–11, NASB95)

Introduction –

There are places in this world that are so beautiful, so glorious, and so awesome that being there takes your breath away. You cannot but feel a sense of awe and wonder. Pictures simply cannot capture the magnificence, in order to fully appreciate the scene, you really have to be there in person. I know all of us have been to places like this. Earlier this summer I had the chance to take a trip to the Smokey Mountains, in Tennessee. Charity and I have been there several times, and we always enjoy going back. It was the first time that our kids have seen the mountains, or gone hiking in a state park, or played in a waterfall, and they really enjoyed it. One morning I was sitting on the porch of the cabin, where we were staying, watching the mist disappear from the tops of the trees. While I was taking in the view, a friend, who lives in Michigan, happened to send me a message. He asked what I was up to, and so I told him: “Just enjoying the great outdoors, check out the view...” and I took a quick snapshot with my phone and sent it to him. And he messaged back saying, “I’m glad you’re having a good time but you don’t have to rub it in!” If you’ve never been the Smokey Mountains, it is definitely worth the drive.

As beautiful and awesome as these things are, Scripture tells us that the God who made all things is even greater. He is not a part of creation; He is the author of creation. We cannot compare Him with anything or anyone we’ve ever seen, because there has never been anyone in the entire universe like the Lord. His power is without limit; His majesty has no equal; the depths of His love cannot be measured. Truly, the glory of God is beyond comprehension. Our human minds cannot even begin to imagine what it would be like to stand in His presence, and to see Him face to face. But we do know this: God is deserving of our worship and He is worthy of our praise. Scripture tells us that everything in this universe was made for the purpose of bringing glory to God. For those who have come to know Him, in a personal way, there should be no greater joy, than worshipping the Lord with our lives.

We’re going to begin a series on worship this morning, and it seems appropriate to begin with God. He is the reason for our rejoicing. He is the audience for our songs of praise. He is the focus of our adoration. If we lose sight of that, or become distracted, and take our eyes off of Him, our worship will become empty.

In my study, this week, I came across a number of helpful definitions for worship. One author says, **“Worship is a lifestyle in which God is honored and we serve Him daily,**

moment by moment.” (Mark Sooy, “The Life of Worship: Rethink, Reform, Renew” p.21) I like that definition because it reminds us that worship is more than something we do, once a week, for an hour on Sunday mornings. It’s more than the readings, or the songs. As Christians, worship is to be the overall ambition of our lives, in everything we do. Another author puts it this way: **“Worship involves our attitudes (including awe, reverence, and respect) and our actions (of bowing, praising, and serving)... It is the believer’s response of all they are to what God is and says and does...”** This definition reminds us that God is to be the center of our praise (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). It isn’t about us, it’s about Him. It isn’t done for our sake, but for His glory. When we consider who He is and the things He has done, our hearts overflow with gratitude. One more definition expresses it well saying, **“...worship 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 heart to His love; and the surrender of will to His purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration...”** (William Temple quoted by Wiersbe in “Real Worship”, p.21)

Our passage this morning exemplifies this type of worship, and captures the reason for our praise. We must glorify God because He is worthy.

In the chapters leading up to these verses, in the book of Revelation, the apostle John has been given a message to record for a group of churches that were struggling in different ways. All of these congregations at one time had been strong and vibrant in the past, but somewhere along the way, they lost focus. Some of the churches were struggling with persecution. Others were becoming worldly. Some were now complacent, having lost their passion for Christ. The vision that John receives in chapters 4-5 should have been enough to rekindle their devotion, calling them back to a life of worship.

In verse 1 John sees an open door into heaven, and he is transported into the throne room of God. The apostle had witnessed some pretty amazing things in the course of his life, but what he was about to see was beyond anything he had experienced. We get the sense that there were no words to be found that could adequately describe what he saw. But he does the best he can, giving us a glimpse into this awesome scene.

He finds himself in the middle of a worship service, where the host of heaven has gathered together. In the center, a glorious figure was seated on the throne. His appearance was overwhelming. Gazing at his beauty was almost like trying to stare into the sun. John doesn’t attempt to portray the features of God; he only speaks of the bright and beautiful colors that resonated from His person: white, red, and a rainbow of green encircling the throne. The floor was like a sea of glass, crystal clear. Lamps were blazing with fire. Lighting flashed all around him, and John could feel the rumbling sound of thunder. It must have been quite extraordinary, and more than a little unnerving at the same time.

His attention shifted outward, to the figures surrounding the throne. Their description sounds a little strange and even bizarre to us, but we have to imagine that they were actually quite beautiful. Ezekiel refers to them, in the OT, as cherubim, a special designation of angels whose role is to praise God continuously. As they sing their song, their worship never becomes dull,

because they never lose the sense of awe and wonder gazing upon the one who sits upon the throne. One commentator notes,

“Their eyes may give the impression of their exceeding knowledge of God, while the faces of a lion, ox, man, and eagle suggest qualities that belong to God, such as royal power, strength, spirituality, and swiftness of action... Together they embody the reflection of God’s nature as the fullness of life and power.” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 1981 volume 12, p. 463*)

These four angelic beings were joined by a group of 24 elders, dressed in white robes wearing golden crowns upon their head. The word that is used here is not a kingly crown, as we often envision, but a victor’s wreath awarded to the champion who has completed a race and crossed the finish line. Biblical scholars have debated the identity of these 24 elders, there are more than a dozen suggestions that have been offered, but probably the best answer is that they represent all believers, who are present in heaven, with the Lord.

I don’t want to get lost in the details, as we look at the passage, but I want to focus on the message of the songs that are sung. They answer the question: why do we worship God? We worship Him because He is worthy to receive glory, honor, and praise.

The song of the angels shows us, first of all, that:

1. We worship God because He is holy. (v.8)

In verse 8 tells about the ministry of the living creatures: “...*day and night they do not cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty...’*” The threefold repetition (holy, holy, holy) says a couple of things. It points to the Trinity. In essence, the angels are singing: “God the Father is holy. God the Son is holy. And the God the Spirit is Holy.” What is true of one is equally true of all three members of the Trinity. It also indicates that God’s holiness is infinite. To repeat the word, in this way, is almost like saying the Lord is really, really, really, holy to the fullest possible degree. Absolute holiness is an essential quality of His nature. He is perfect in every way. There is not a single flaw in His character. His motives are always pure. He always does what is right and He always says what is true.

The Bible presents a concept of God that is very different from other religions. In the ancient world, when John wrote the book of Revelation, there were temples all throughout the Roman Empire devoted to false deities like Zeus, or Ares, or Athena. But if you were to read Greek mythology, you would discover that these so-called gods were just as selfish and vindictive as human beings. There was no concern for justice, in their stories, and little regard for human life. Their gods were not better than man, and certainly not worthy of praise. But we worship a holy God. There is not a sliver of evil or a shred of deceit to be found in Him.

Imagine hiking through the mountains, making your way through the trees, to a valley, where you stumbled upon a scenic lake. The water is cool, and clear. It looks like it would be refreshing, and so start to kneel down, to scoop water into your hands for a drink. But before you do that, one of the other hikers warns you, “I wouldn’t recommend doing that if I were you, at least not without boiling the water first.” “What do you mean, it looks so clean,” you object.

“It may look okay, but a few miles down the road there is a factory that has been spilling pollutants into the soil, and it has poisoned the water. You might not be able to see it with your eyes, but I guarantee it will make you sick if you drink it.” Scripture tells us that sin has infected the universe, corrupting the human heart. We may not always see it on the outside, the effects are poisonous within our hearts. But God is separate and set apart from this fallen world. No matter how corrupt society might become, the Lord remains incorruptible.

In the psalms God’s people are urged to: *“Exalt the Lord our God and worship at His holy hill, for holy is the Lord our God.” (Psalm 99:9)* How different, God is, from the human race. We are constantly looking back, at mistakes we have made, saying to ourselves, “Wow, I should have handled that situation differently. I really made a mess of things again. I let my pride get the best of me. I wasn’t as patient as I should have been. I really wish I could go back and do that over.” God doesn’t have those kinds of moments. He is righteous and just in all His ways. But God’s presence in our lives has a transforming effect. Those who worship Him are called to live holy lives that honor Him. In our own efforts, that would prove impossible, but God is working in our hearts, shaping us more and more to reflect to His character in our lives. Psalm 24 asks the question, *“Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully. He shall receive a blessing from the Lord And righteousness from the God of his salvation.” (Psalm 24:3–5)*

2. We worship God because He is everlasting. (v.8-9)

Look at the second part of the song, in verse 8. *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.”* If you were to look back, over the course of history, there has never been a moment without God. He existed before there was time. If you were to look ahead, into the future, to the end of the ages, there will never be a moment when God ceases to exist. God has always been, and always will be.

John had seen several kings come and go during his lifetime. But God’s reign will last forever, and His kingdom will have no end. In verse 9 we read, *“...the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever...”* That phrase literally means: “from age to age.”

There is only one constant in the universe. All around us, things are constantly changing, in this world. That is especially true in our modern age. Nothing ever stays the same for very long. You just never know, what was here today might be gone tomorrow. That favorite restaurant, that has been a staple in the community for years, ever since you were a little child, you take for granted that they will stay in business forever. But one day you pull in the parking lot and the windows are dark, the door is boarded shut, and the sign out front advertising that the building is for sale. You wonder “What happened?” What a disappointment. You had been there so many times, but nothing lasts forever.

Everything in this universe is wearing down, or fading away. But there is One who endures forever, through all generations. *Psalm 90:2* reads, *“Before the mountains were born Or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.”* As

we get older, we run into all kinds of problems. Our muscles and joints start to ache. We don't have as much energy. Our eyesight isn't as clear as it used to be. Our hearing starts to fade. We find ourselves moving around a little slower. But God doesn't age and He never grows old. He doesn't forget His promises, and His strength does not diminish over time. He is every bit as potent today as He has always been.

Another passage assures us, *"The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty... Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity."* (Psalm 93:1-2) This gives us confidence. When things seem uncertain, we have someone that we can hold onto, someone who is holding onto us, no matter what. Sometimes we find ourselves worrying about the future, but we don't need to do that, because God isn't going anywhere, He will be continue to be with us tomorrow, just like He was there yesterday. Nothing could change that reality. That is one of the themes of the book of Revelation. God has the future under control. Through all the conflicts and struggles in this world, God is still on the throne, and will continue to be, even after the final victory has been won. So don't be afraid, and worry about the future. Praise the Lord: who was, and who is, and who is to come. It's in His hands.

3. We worship God because He is our Creator.

We've heard the song of the angels, now we listen to the song of the 24 elders. In verse 11 they fall to their knees, and bow before the throne, singing: *"Worthy are You, our Lord, and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created."*

God is the maker of all things in heaven and on earth. His was the voice that called out, in the darkness, "let there be light" causing the first rays of sunshine to burst across the cosmos. He is the one who stretched out the heavens, and hung the stars in their place. He is the one who carved the mountains and the valleys. He is the one who poured the oceans. He planted the trees and the flowers. The beauty that we see all around us is the work of His hands. He designed the different types of creatures in the animal kingdom, from the giant elephant to the tiny mouse. He even formed the very first human, from the dust of the earth, breathing into his nostrils the breath of life.

It is because of God's will that all things came to be. Nothing was accident. He had a purpose for everything, even though it might be difficult sometimes for us to discern what that purpose might be.

The beauty and harmony that we observe in nature is a testimony to the goodness and the power of God. Scripture says, *"You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you."* (Nehemiah 9:6) It seems strange that we would need to be reminded that God alone deserves our praise, but we do. For whatever reason, the tendency of human beings is to worship created things, rather than the Creator. In the ancient world, people worshipped the sun and the stars. They worshipped animals. They would chop down a tree, from the forest, and craft an idol from the wood, and

put it on a pedestal in their house, and then bow down to it, treating it as if it were god. They would pray to the block of wood, and offer incense to the block of wood, and expect that somehow their lives were going to be enriched because of that little block of wood. How foolish! But don't people, in our modern world, do the very same thing? Don't we continue to fashion idols, of a different sort, and offer our devotion to created things, rather the Creator? We worship comfort or entertainment. We worship money or the things that money can buy. We worship technology, or celebrities. There is no end to the idols that man makes. But idolatry is an offense to God. That would be like me planting a garden, standing out in the hot sun, tilling the soil, sowing the seeds, watering, pulling weeds, and picking the fruit. And as my children enjoy those red tomatoes and sweet ears of corn, what do they do? They go outside and say "thank you ground for all of this good food, thank you vine for growing such a wonderful the tomato, thank you stalk for producing such a magnificent ear of corn." As I stood there watching them give thanks to these inanimate objects, I would wondering, "what about me, I did all the hard work, don't I deserve a little gratitude?"

When we worship the creation, rather than the creator, we are robbing God of the praise that He deserves. In the book of Isaiah, God rebukes the people of Israel for worshipping idols. He says,

"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing... Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 40:25–28)

Everything in this world owes its existence to God. We wouldn't be here without Him. He is the one who has given us the gift of life. And so he deserves our praise. The reasonable response of the creature is to glorify the Creator. It's what we were made to do.

4. We worship God because He is our Redeemer.

In Revelation 4, we have looked at two hymns of praise: by the angelic creatures, and the twenty-four elders. That outpouring of praise continues, into chapter 5 as the focus shifts from God the Father to God the Son, and the work of redemption He has accomplished. In verses 9-10 we read, *"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation...'"*

God never stopped loving us, even though the human race has gone astray. He had every right to give up on, and let us continue down the destructive path that we chose. But instead, He cares so much that He was willing to go to incredible lengths in order to rescue us. God the Father sent His Son into the world to save us from our sin. God the Son gave His life as a sacrifice, on the cross, where He died in our place. He shed His blood to redeem us from sin. He paid the ransom, and set us free, so that we might become children of God.

For us, salvation is a gift, offered freely, by the grace of God. All that we are asked to do is believe on the name of the Lord Jesus and we will be saved. But the price that Jesus paid on our behalf was tremendous. Yet, He was willing to give everything for us.

We have seen examples of people who were willing to sacrifice their lives for others. Today is the anniversary of September 11, and we remember the brave rescue workers who ran into the twin towers, before the building collapsed, in order to save as many people as they could. When everyone else was running away from danger, they ran into the danger, and made a difference in the lives of many. We continue to honor their courage sacrifice. How much more is Christ worthy of our affection and gratitude? The suffering He endured, for us, was greater than we can imagine. Christ carried the sins of the whole human race, on His shoulders, and not only died in our place, but took upon Himself the judgment that we deserved. Because of Him, we are able to receive forgiveness for our past and hope for the future.

Conclusion –

As we consider these verses, we find a compelling reason for why our lives ought to be devoted to the worship of God: He is worthy. He is the holy God, whose rule is everlasting, our Creator and Redeemer. Only God is deserving of our praise.

One author comments: “the most important lesson here is that worship should focus on God, not the surroundings... the worship of heaven... is spontaneous, moving, exciting, and literally rung from the hearts of the participating entities out of their gratitude to God... [Today] when the saints assemble, the worship of every church ought always to be nothing less than a rehearsal for the day when we enter the heavenly worship described here. (*Patterson, P. NAC: Revelation volume 39, p. 160 2012*)

Let us give Him our worship, not just when we gather together (although worship should especially be the focus of what we do) but also every day of our lives. When we wake up in the morning because of God’s gracious gift of life... when we go to bed at night knowing that our knowing that we rest secure in our Heavenly Father’s care, and all through the day as we experience the goodness of His blessings... let our hearts overflow with praise.

He is worthy to receive glory and honor and power. We can’t comprehend all of John’s vision, what he saw, what he heard. But that one thought is enough to fill us with unceasing wonder: The Lord God is worthy

If we cannot get excited about the God who created all things, the God who is Holy in all His ways, the God who has redeemed us, then I don’t know what could possibly move us or fill us with passion.