



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 9 • Number 3 • Summer 2000

[L]et every saint praise him, but especially the congregation of saints; when they come together, let them join in praising God. The more the better; it is the more like heaven.

MATTHEW HENRY

But in our busy world today many Christians have lost sight of this great aspect of life—our worship of God. We have lowered the standard of the Christian life. Instead of knocking at the door of the Lord, we walk around outside the door and do “errands” for God—preaching included.

ROBERT CUNVILLE, “WORSHIP: A WAY OF LIFE” IN *DECISION* (SEPTEMBER 1997), 13-14.

Don't let your worship decline to the performance of mere duty. Don't let the childlike awe and wonder be choked out by unbiblical views of virtue. Don't let the scenery and poetry and music of your relationship with God shrivel up and die. You have capacities for joy which you can scarcely imagine. They were made for the enjoyment of God. He can awaken them no matter how long they have lain asleep. Pray for his quickening power. Open your eyes to his glory. It is all around you. “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.”

JOHN PIPER, *DESIRING GOD: MEDITATIONS OF A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST* (PORTLAND, OREGON: MULTNOMAH PRESS, 1986), 94.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION AND THE SUBJECT OF WORSHIP

Tom Wells

In a previous article on worship, from the book of Hebrews, I pointed to two different ways a Bible book may affect our worship. First, it may give us materials for worship. Hebrews does that by lengthy descriptions of the glories of Christ. That is helpful in worshiping the Triune God. Second, a book may discuss worship. Hebrews does that by describing the Old Testament system of sacrificial worship.

When we come to Revelation we find much the same thing. The book shows us the persons of the Trinity, the very thing we need to admire and worship them. More than that, however, it shows us scenes of worship. Though often symbolic, these scenes (unlike those in Hebrews) are directly relevant to New Covenant believers. Worship, then, is very much a part of the book of Revelation.

MATERIALS FOR WORSHIP IN REVELATION

Descriptions of the Trinity appear already in the introduction (1:1-8). God is the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4; cf v.8), an echo of his eternity. The name is based on God's self-revelation when he was about to intervene in Israel's history (Exodus 3:14). In adding the words, “who is to come,” John again shows God as active in history. There is no suggestion that God stands aloof from his world. His activity, however, is seen in the works of his agent, the Holy Spirit—he is alluded to in the phrase

"the seven spirits who are before his throne"¹—and in the works of a further agent, "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. [He is the one] who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father . . ." (1:5-6).

This summary of the person and work of Christ is loaded with good things for the believer, things that prompt worship. He faithfully witnessed to this fallen world in leaving it by death. That was not his last word, however. He rose again and now has all authority in heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18). Not even the kings of the earth are excepted. He holds them in his hands. We are reminded that the New Testament commands us to honor the kings of the earth (Romans 13:7; 1 Peter 2:17). How much more worthy is he of our worship and praise!

Next John turns from the bearing of the Lord Jesus' activity on the world generally to its effect on his people. Gripped by awe, he drops description and breaks out in adoration: "To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1:5b-6). And he is not done! He calls both the world and Christ's people to a further glimpse of Jesus' glory: "Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen" (1:7). O come, let us adore him! We must see God and Christ to worship them, and here, in his introduction, John sets them before us.

We turn next to the first vision in the book. John opens with a description of his circumstances as he wrote (1:9-10). He was an exile on Patmos when he heard behind him a loud voice, a voice like a trumpet, commissioning him to

write to seven churches (1:11). He turned to see who spoke (1:12a).

[O]n turning I saw seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like burnished brass, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. (1:12b-16)

What John sees is clothed in symbols. There is a striking figure "like the Son of Man." John is dazzled and frightened, and reacts accordingly:

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hell. Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (1:17-20)

John sees Jesus, but not the Jesus of mere human weakness and frailty. This Jesus shares the endowments of the Ancient of Days of Daniel 7:9, yet he is distinct. He is "one like a son of man" (Daniel 7:13, margin) who comes with the clouds of heaven. And he comes for judgment, as we see from other references in Revelation to the sword that proceeds from his mouth (2:12, 16; 19:11-16, 21). A fearful vision indeed! No wonder John fainted. What a blessed

word comes to him: "Do not be afraid!" This may, in fact, be a key to the entire sight.

"Fear not," for your fears are groundless. You are affrighted at your own mercies. The thing you fear is the very thing that brings to you salvation. . . . That was indeed a vision of matchless and overpowering glory. But with all this awful and impressive grandeur, it was only a presentation in a single view, of the grounds of confidence and joyful hope which flow from infinite power and wisdom and love. So that in these very things John had the brightest evidence of his own and the church's eternal security and triumph.²

What looks to be a call to collapse proves to be an occasion for worship!

The letters to the churches in chapters two and three give us materials for worship as well. As the Lord Jesus speaks there, we see his godly attributes. His knowledge encompasses everything about the churches (see "I know," 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). We see his power in various ways. He holds the stars that represent the angels of the churches³ in his hands (2:1). He can remove the lampstands that represent the churches from their places (2:5), along with other acts of judgment (2:16, 22-23; 3:3, 9, 16). And he has power and determination to reward his faithful followers (2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21). He is, in fact, "the one who searches mind and hearts, and [who] will give to each of you as your works deserve" (2:23). In adopting this description of Yahweh from Jeremiah 17:10 and elsewhere (cf. Psalm 7:9; Proverbs 24:12 and Jeremiah 11:20), the Lord gathers up the themes of his own knowledge and power for judgment and reward in one striking word.

Skipping for the moment chapters 4 and 5, we come to the beginning of the record of the seven seals. Here we see Father and Son in the act of bringing judgment. We meet

their agents in the form of four horses and riders (6:1-8). The agents are the symbols of the powers that God and Christ hold to bring the sweep of their wrath across an unbelieving world. In quick succession they conquer men (6:1-2), create social chaos (6:3-4), produce famine (6:5-6) and unleash further death-dealing forces on humanity (6:7-8). This is magnificent power indeed, breathtaking and awe-inspiring! It reminds us of God's earlier judgment on Jerusalem, where he speaks of "my four deadly acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild animals, and pestilence, to cut off humans and animals from it" (Ezekiel 14:21).

But is it justice? The fifth seal gives a partial answer to that question:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" (6:9-10).

This glimpse of a different scene reminds us that the judge of all the earth will do right. His people have suffered at the hands of a godless world. They cry to him for relief. While his martyrs rest from their labors (6:11), the sixth seal shows that righteous judgment rolls on. Earth and heaven join forces to display God's might (6:12-14). Men of all ranks tremble.

Then the kings of the earth, the magnates and the generals, the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (6:15-17).

Here is the recognition of grandeur that we would call *worship* if it came from men in appreciation of the God behind the spectacle. But it does not. It is left to us who believe to stop our mouths and bow our heads in wonder.

The judgments that fall in Revelation come in series. When the Lamb opens the seventh seal we find seven angels with seven trumpets (8:1-6). The blasts of their trumpets bring further dire judgments (8:7-21). Nor is that all. Seven angels with "seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God" appear (15:7). They pour out their bowls (16:1-20). So severe are they that mountains and islands run from them, and men pay tribute to their devastating effect by cursing the God who sends them (16:20b).

Even this does not exhaust the subject of judgment in Revelation. (See 17:1-18:24; 19:1-20:10, and the climactic judgment on men, 20:11-15). Each of these displays the glory of God and of the Lamb. Each prompts wonder and admiration and worship from the people of God. But it is time to turn to the scenes of worship.

DESCRIPTIONS OF WORSHIP IN REVELATION

If Revelation is a book of judgment—and it is—it is also a book rich in descriptions of worship. This is in keeping with the purpose of the book, to show that God is sovereign in what appears to be a chaotic world, and to show that his people are safe.⁴ As the light dawns on these truths, men and angels rejoice, extolling the glory of God.

The first extended description of worship falls in two parts in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter four shows us the throne of God in a scene reminiscent of Isaiah 6. Around the throne are twenty-four elders dressed in white and seated on their own thrones (4:4). Also there are "four living creatures" with animal and (in one case) human features (4:6-8). Neither the elders nor the creatures are explained to us, but their function is clear, to worship the creator God. He is

the focus. The creatures continually celebrate the holiness of God in familiar words, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (cf. Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 1:8). In praising God's holiness they recognize both his purity and his distinction or separateness from his creation. This does not mean he has abandoned his world, but that his own being transcends it.

John's readers lived in a world (as we do) where evil was rampant and apparently all-powerful. Goodness was weak and frustrated and ineffectual. But John's very first vision of heaven shows that these appearances are deceptive. . . . Our God is good. And he is the *Lord God Almighty*. Real power is not with evil, but with God who is holy. Nor is this a passing phase. God is he who *was, and is, and is to come*. . . . God's power and eternal being ensure that his holiness will triumph over all evil.⁵

The twenty-four elders join the celebration by ascribing worthiness⁶ to God. "You are worthy, 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" (4:11). As creator, God deserves recognition and admiration. If this is seen to be true in heaven, we too must acknowledge it by our own appreciation and praise. We may adopt these very words as our own.

When we turn to chapter 5 the scene focuses in two senses on the right hand of God. There is something in God's right hand. More than that, there is *someone* at his right hand, one who shares the rule with him (cf. 3:21).

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. And I began to

weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals" (5:1-5).

Again we are faced with symbolism that is not explained. What precisely is the scroll with seven seals? Is it a deed? Is it a covenant, or some third or fourth thing? The commentators do not agree among themselves, but we need not be put off by this. The scene sets a Lamb before us, and the following chapters show him opening the seals and bringing history as we know it to its end by judgment and the introduction of a new heaven and a new earth. These central matters arise from his worthy work and will lead to "blessing and honor and glory and might" being ascribed to him and to God "forever and ever" (5:13)!

A closer look at the Lamb shows us how his work could lead to such earth-shaking events. As Lion of the Tribe of Judah and Root of David (5:5), he is the Messiah who came as conqueror to establish God's kingship in the earth. He is also, however, the Lamb who has been slaughtered. Already in Isaiah 53 Yahweh revealed that misunderstanding, oppression and death were the conditions of his conquest, but now that is behind him. The universe acknowledges his worthiness.

The lamb receives the worship of the heavenly attendants just as God had in chapter 4, but now the circle of worship expands, so that every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea worships "the One who is seated on the throne and the lamb" (verse 13).⁷

Why do men and creatures flock to this celebration? Because his slaughter was not in vain: By his death he has

transformed humanity and history in preparation for the new heavens and earth. "[B]y your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on the earth" (5:9-10). Here are the grounds of his worship. And here is its content: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (5:12)! May God give us the grace to join this song now and in eternity!

Chapter 7 contains a third scene of worship (7:9-17). In its early verses (7:9-12) it reproduces something of the praise we have met in chapter 5. (The repetition emphasizes how appropriate it is to praise God and Christ for their mighty acts repeatedly.) Then John introduces a sight in which a heavenly being asks him a question.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple" (7:13-15b).

We are reminded by this description of the words of the Psalmist: "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble" (Psalm 102:2). It is appropriate for all the creatures of the earth to praise the Lord, but none have more reason than those whose robes have been made white in the blood of the Lamb. But the elder is not done. He recites the further benefits of the redeemed, for which they praise their God. The language mixes figures with small glimpses of future reality. God will shelter them,

secure them from hunger and thirst, and keep them from suffering any scorching heat (7:15c-16). In other words, they will experience the blessings of Isaiah 49:10 and Psalm 23, "for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life" (7:17a-b). Their quality of life is summarized finally in another figure that reminds us of the divine intention of good for his people: "God will wipe every tear from their eyes" (7:17c). Salvation from the penalty for sin will be followed by spiritual prosperity forever. But these promises belong to all believers; they are part of our *hope*. Here again is a call to us to worship as they worship.

The blowing of the seventh trumpet in chapter 11 brings us to another scene of worship celebrating the kingship of God through his agent, the Messiah. In verse fifteen God and Messiah appear together in a way reminiscent of Psalm 2. There they contemplated the destruction of their future enemies. Here they are congratulated by loud voices from heaven for having finished their task. The scene is proleptic, anticipating the victory which will come to pass quickly. God's kingdom has come at last. He has exercised his great power in the midst of rebellion:

"The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth" (11:18). How soon would all this happen? Heaven seems to resound with the answer: "Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple, and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail" (11:19). Can the day be far off?

The theme of worship on the occasions of God's judgments appears through much of the rest of the book (12:10-12; 15:3-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-4). It is unnecessary to discuss all of

these, but chapter 12 deserves special attention. The chapter opens (12:1-6) with a highly symbolic vision of the birth of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus, from the godly remnant of Israel under the figure of a woman.⁸ The dragon, Satan, prepares to destroy him, but is foiled by God's activity. Then follows an account of war in heaven in which Satan and his angels were cast down to earth (12:7-9). This leads to worship by an unnamed voice from heaven:

Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death (12:10-11).

Several things call for comment here. First, the note of successful judgment on the part of God is clearly sounded here. Whether we think of the book's bearing on men and women of the first century or our own century or the final century, we must remember the aptness of this theme. Though severity differs from age to age and place to place, the church is called to suffering for Christ in every age. In all her perils her comfort lies in the sovereignty and wisdom of God. That lay behind the word to John in 1:17-18, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hades." God is still in charge; Christ shares his throne. The hour may be dark, but our enemies will be defeated.

Second, the power that lies behind our enemies, Satan himself, is in the hands of God to do with as he pleases. Third, "the blood of the Lamb and . . . the word of their tes-

timony," leading even to martyrdom, is sufficient protection in the bleakest hour. His blood (=sacrificial death) covers the sins of his people while they remain loyal to him.

For all these reasons the worshiping voice from heaven calls us to join the chorus of appreciation, thanksgiving and praise to God.

The mood changes in the final two scenes of worship in Revelation (19:5-8; 21:3-4), which celebrate the final union of God and his people. Let's look more closely at the first of these.

And from the throne came a voice saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great." Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride is ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints (19:5-8).

As important as judgment was and is, it is preliminary to the final phase of redemption. Judgment casts aside the unsuitable fish (Matthew 13:47-50) and blows away the chaff (Matthew 3:12; 13:30), but that is not the goal of history; God's union with his people is.

Heaven rejoices over this union, and so must we who are the bride at this wedding. The mark of a joyous wedding feast is the mutual admiration of bride and bridegroom. What God sees in us is what he has put in us, but what we see in him is what has been natively his forever, his love and compassion and mercy over his people. Are there greater themes to celebrate than these? O, come let us adore him!

SUMMING UP

The study of worship can never be an academic matter, It involves our lives at their deepest points, our relations to God. At the same time, we must see that a detached, academic view of the subject is inevitable if our hearts are not fixed on God. That is why prayer and praise (worship) go hand in hand. The proper response to a study like this is to cry out to God for a fuller measure of his grace. If he grants that prayer, we will admire and worship and adore him. And if we are wise, we will let what we have found in this study of Revelation and worship reform our acts of praise and thanksgiving to our God.

Author

Tom Wells is one of the pastors of The King's Chapel, West Chester, Ohio. He is the author of numerous books, including *Come to Me, Come Home Forever, God Is King, Christian: Take Heart, A Price for a People, A Vision for Missions* and *Faith: The Gift of God*. He is a conference speaker and a regular contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. See the standard commentaries for discussions of the Holy Spirit in this verse. While the Spirit is merely mentioned here, later passages cite his activity. In chapters two and three he is repeatedly described as the one who speaks to the churches (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:1, 6, 13, 22), evidently as the agent of the Lord Jesus. See also 14:13 and 22:17.
2. James B. Ramsey, *Revelation* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, repr. 1977), 61-62.
3. Who these *angels* are has been the subject of extensive debate. Many have taken them to be pastors or other representatives of the seven congregations since the word "angel" can also mean "messenger." For other options see the discussion in G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, repr. 1983), 68-70. He leans toward the view that the angels are the "heavenly counterparts of the earthly congregations," a complex idea requiring a good deal of explanation, which he proceeds to give it.
4. See the standard commentaries for discussions of who God's people are in Revelation. Some think they are men of the first century, the *preterist*

view. Others think they are believers in the end times, the *futurist* view. George Eldon Ladd in *A Commentary on the Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1972), 14, wrote: “[W]e conclude that the correct method of interpreting the Revelation is a blending of the preterist and futurist methods. The beast is both Rome and the eschatological Antichrist—and, we might add, any demonic power which the church must face in her entire history.”

5. Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1969), 91.
6. In English *worship* and *worthiness* derive from the same root: to worship is to declare someone’s worth. Though the Greek words do not have any etymological connection, verses ten and eleven reflect this intersection of ideas.
7. Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), 62.
8. It is often assumed that the woman in chapter twelve is thought to be the virgin Mary by the Roman Catholic Church. A footnote in a modern English Catholic New Testament, however, reads as follows: “12, 1: A woman: this woman is not the Blessed Virgin, for the details of the prophecy do not fit her. The prophecy pictures the Church of the Old and New Covenants. . . . By accommodation the Church applies this verse to the Blessed Virgin.” The quotation is from the so-called “Confraternity Edition,” i.e., *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Patterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1941), 721.

Worship is central to the church as a whole . . . if you don’t have congregational worship, you don’t have a church.

C. WELTON GADDY, *THE GIFT OF WORSHIP* (NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE: BROADMAN PRESS, 1992), 60.

The purpose of theology is doxology—We study in order to praise.

J. I. PACKER

We must not worship without study, for ignorant worship is of limited value and can be very dangerous. We may develop “a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2) and do great harm to ourselves and others. But worship must be added to study to complete the renewal of our mind through a willing absorption in the radiant person who is worthy of all praise. Study without worship is also dangerous, and the people of Jesus constantly suffer from its effects, especially in academic settings. To handle the things of God without worship is always to falsify them.

DALLAS WILLARD, *THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY: REDISCOVERING OUR HIDDEN LIFE IN GOD* (SAN FRANCISCO: HARPER, 1998), 362.