

“Why Worship?”*Revelation 4***Contemporary Contact** – **BLANK1** – *walk up to the pulpit with my golf clubs...*

Have you ever thought about what you could be doing in this Sunday morning time spot if you didn't have to come to church? Maybe a pastor isn't supposed to think like this, but I was trying to think about coming to church from the perspective of an outsider for a moment and what it is that people do instead. (sleep in, watch or play sports, socialise, etc.) Could it be that people who skip out don't know what they are missing? Could it be that they have no idea what difference it makes to miss out on gathering for worship? Do you?

I ask this question “Why worship?” because it is, I think, the most obvious question that we should be asking as we open up our Bibles to Revelation 4. We are currently walking and working our way through an ancient book with a very contemporary message because there is so much reality that we miss without the revelation, the unveiling, Jesus given in it.

Kind of like the newly-wed couple I read about, Doug & Sylvia, who were escorted to their hotel's bridal suite in the wee hours of the morning. In the suite they saw a sofa, chairs, and table, but where was the bed?

Then they discovered the sofa was a hide-a-bed, with a lumpy mattress and sagging springs. So they spent a restless night on the hide-a-bed and got up in the morning very disgruntled with their bridal suite. The new husband went to the hotel desk and gave the management a tongue-lashing.

“Did you open the door in the room?” asked the clerk. Doug recalled seeing a door but had assumed it was a closet, so he went back to the room, opened the “closet” door and there, complete with a fruit basket and chocolates was a beautiful bedroom! Things are not always as they seem are they?

Which is why Jesus showed and invited John into “a door standing open in heaven” so he could see and experience a reality that far too many people miss.

Read Revelation 4.

What John sees in chs. 4-5 is pivotal for the whole revelation and for him and the churches because it gives them an all-important perspective, what the Ojibwe first nations people would call an *agidasin*, a vantage point, literally a place “on top of”, usually on top of a rock where you can see distant vistas and gain a new perspective. I remember an *agidasin* moment years ago while flying over the Assiniboine River. At the time I felt like I things were going sideways and even backwards in my life given a number of losses and discouragements that had happened. But as I looked out the airplane window I saw the river for the first time as it really was, **SLIDE3** not as I imagined it to be from seeing it on a map (i.e. a few bends but relatively straight).

I was amazed at the number of twists and turns in the river, how at times it even flowed backwards and how seldom it actually flowed in a straight line. I sensed that God had opened a door for me, given me a parable of my life being like that river. Whatever the obstacles were in the river’s path, however far sideways or backwards it flowed at times, the lay of the land was a far greater reality and gave ultimate certainty that the river *would* find its way “home”.

What John saw in this particular vision was not a river, but “a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.” You see John is invited into the cockpit, the control room of the universe, the operations centre. Looking at the challenges John was facing and that his churches were facing (i.e. things were going sideways and backwards in their life), one could easily wonder if perhaps God had fallen asleep at the wheel, that he had let things slide, or even that someone else had taken over control (e.g. Pergamum—“where Satan has his throne”^{2:13}; cf. the doubts John the Baptist had when Herold threw him into prison^{Mt.11}). In order to counter the growing global tide of idolatrous allegiance given to the emperor John needed a counter image, a vision of alternative worship. **Coin SLIDE6**

The scene that greeted him in heaven had more special effects than a contemporary Star Wars movie, and surpassed anything humanly possible, for what John sees is not virtual reality but the real deal. He sees that the throne in

the control-room at Supreme Headquarters is indeed occupied, and the identity of “the one seated on it” is never for a moment in doubt. It is just that with typical Jewish reverence for the Holy One, John uses simile rather than direct description to portray “the one seated on the throne”. The symbols and images John sees and the literary palate he uses to paint a verbal picture for us are all from the OT and produce an effect that is truly awe inspiring. **BLANK7**

- “the voice...like a trumpet” (1¹⁰; cf. Ex. 19^{16,19} trumpets then = attention-getters)
 - The throne^{Is.6:1;Dan.7:9}, *encircling the throne*, *from the throne*, *around the throne*
 - The precious gems – Ezekiel’s vision^{ch.1:26} (like a sea of glass clear as crystal¹)
 - “the rainbow” – the sign of the Creator’s great covenant with Noah,^{Gen.9:13-16}
 - the “flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder” from the throne = echoes from His appearance to Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai.^{Ex.19:16-19}
- = the sounds, the vibrant colours, the brilliance = awesome!

- Surrounding the throne =

a) “twenty-four other thrones and seated on them were twenty-four elders”

= (i) angelic beings? (ii) heavenly council? (iii) the raptured church?

- See the “numbers in Revelation” guide... **SLIDE8**
- How is 24 (or multiples of 12) used in the Bible and in Revelation?
 - Twenty-four divisions of priests in the OT (1 Chr. 24)
 - Jesus spoke of his disciples/apostles being given the kingdom and sitting “*on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel*” (Lk. 22³⁰; Mt. 19²⁸)
 - In the New Jerusalem in Rev. 21¹² has “*twelve gates...On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel*” and ¹⁴“*twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles*”
- How are they dressed? “in white^{3:4} and...crowns^{2:10; 3:11} ...on their heads”
- 24 Elders = representative of whole people of God (OT & NT)²

¹ We do well to keep in mind that modern glass did not exist in the first century, but was usually very dark so glass as clear as crystal would be thought of as splendidly magnificent and enormously expensive. See Morris, Revelation, p. 88.

b) “four living creatures”^{v.6} (cf. Ezek. 1⁵ forms = a man, lion, ox, eagle) **Coin SLIDE9**

- 4⁷ = “like a lion...ox...man...flying eagle” (all eyes = their idiom & ours = “eyes in the back of his/her head” to say someone is all seeing)
- Representative of the most noble/strong/wise/swift creatures
 - “*like a lion*” = king of the jungle (cf. ANE, esp. Babylon)
 - “*like an ox*” = king of the beasts in the ANE (see OT...Num. 23:22 & refs.)
 - “*like a man*” = king of the earth (cf. Gen. 1:26-30)
 - “*like a flying eagle*” = king of the air (cf. Ezekiel 1:10) **BLANK10**

It was standard practice in ancient pagan religion to worship various aspects of nature. In contrast, John sees creation worshipping *God* and the four living creatures serving as worship leaders for the whole of creation.³

And the song they song/chant echoes that of Isaiah’s vision^{6:3} and focuses on God’s **holiness** and **eternality**, both of which are emphasised repeatedly throughout scripture and embedded in God’s very name as revealed to Moses (“I AM”—Ex. 3¹⁴).

- Lord God Almighty = the “All Power”, the Supreme One
- “who sits on the throne” (repetition underlines his absolute sovereignty)
- “they lay their crowns before the throne” (*grateful* humble submission, not forced)
 - One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess...Php. 2¹⁰

The 2nd song/chant begins “you are worthy” (i.e. ascribe worship...). Rulers of Rome craved glory, honor, and power. “Towns throughout Asia Minor organized *hymnodes*, male choirs that sang praises and held banquets to honor the emperor.”⁴ “You are worthy” were the first words used in the triumphal processions of the emperor and the title “Lord and God” was blasphemously claimed by the emperor Domitian.

At a time when idolatrous pagan powers seemed to dominate the world,

² “Elders were leaders of the people and stood as their representatives before God’s glory at Sinai (Ex. 24:9 – 10) as they would in the eschatological time (Isa. 24:23). Thus these elders represent God’s people as a whole, all of whom together are a “kingdom and priests” (Rev. 1:6; 5:10).” Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (NIV Appl. Comm).

³ J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, p. 84.

⁴ J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, p. 60. See also pp. 72 & 86.

this vision of all creation worshipping the living God must have been a powerful counter image and corrective. “This vision teaches us that the surest way to gain or regain an accurate vision is to worship.”^{Johnston,141} Clearly there is only one truly “worthy...to receive all *glory*, and *honor* and *power*” for he alone “created all things” (in the Bible God is the only one who “creates”) and sustains all things (Heb. 1³ “upholding the universe” ; Col. 1¹⁷ “in him all things hold together”). God alone should receive all glory and power, for he created all things (4:11), a claim that again challenged the pretensions of Caesar in John’s day as well as all human idols since then.

Implications & Applications

1) God is in Control – even when things are going sideways & backwards.

How can this be (e.g. Habakkuk, Job, Ps. 73)? Short answer = It’s complicated.

a) C.S. Lewis’ parent analogy

“Anyone who has been in authority knows how a thing can be in accordance with your will in one way and not in another. It may be quite sensible for a mother to say to the children, ‘I’m not going to go and make you tidy the room every night. You’ve got to learn to keep it tidy on your own.’ Then she goes up one night and finds [it a mess].... That is against her will... But on the other hand, it is her will which has left the children free to be untidy. The same thing arises in [life]....God created things which had free will...[which] is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having...Of course God knew what would happen if they [mis]used their freedom...apparently He thought it worth the risk.”⁵

b) Philip Yancey chess analogy **SLIDE**

“In high school I took pride in my ability to play chess. I joined the chess club, and during lunch hour I could be found sitting at a table with other nerds...I studied techniques, won most of my matches, and put the game aside for 20 years. Then I met a truly fine chess player who had been perfecting his skills since high school, and I learned what it is like to play against a master. Although I had complete freedom to make any move I wished, none of my strategies mattered much. His superior skill guaranteed that my purposes inevitably ended up serving his own. Perhaps there is a spiritual picture for us here....With the Grand Master, victory is assured, no matter how the board of life may look at any given moment.”⁶

Life App = “Stop striving, and know that I am God.” (Ps. 46¹⁰)

- Reminders that God is in control, life preservers to cling to (e.g. Susan)

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 47-48.

⁶ <http://odb.org/2015/08/05/chess-master-2/>

2) God alone is worthy of our Worship

- “This heavenly vision puts us all in our places and calls us to our highest vocation.”
- “[Our] chief end is to glorify **God**, and to **enjoy him forever.**”

Wearing ordinary glasses we do not come to this conclusion and therefore miss our highest and most fulfilling vocation, preoccupying ourselves with other activities that are beneath our dignity (point to my golf clubs). Revelation 4 is like putting on corrective lenses. The longer we wear these corrective lenses, the more we realize how appropriate, how wise it is that the elders come off their thrones and rather than clinging to their crowns, their accomplishments, their power, they cast them down before the throne and the one who sits upon it.

- Vocational implications (what we do, why we do it, how we do it)
- Educational implications...
- Relational implications...

Worship = praising and thanking and celebrating God for: (a) Who he is, His character qualities, and (b) What he has done (in creation^{ch.4} & salvation^{ch.5}) and continues to do.

Worship changes us – Nothing banishes pride of mortal flesh or human competition and agendas better than a taste of God’s infinite greatness. And nothing puts our fears and worries and problems back in proper perspective like worship (e.g. Psalm 73¹⁶⁻¹⁷; Ps. 46; Ps. 62; and many other “life preservers”).