

Heavenly Worship
Revelation 4:1-5:12
Key Verse: 5:13

“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever.”

Through Matthew 28:16-20, I found direction for 2008 to make disciples of Jesus Christ of all nations. This is the mission statement of his church. It has been planted in the history and culture of UBF, through our founders. However, we must constantly renew our purpose. Most of all, we must recognize that this ministry springs forth from the worship of Christ.

As we begin a new year, let's study heavenly worship through Revelation chapters four and five. Revelation may be the most intriguing book in the Bible. It is full of powerful imagery, describing the terror of evil and the conquering power of God in Christ. Christians past and present have recited passages from Revelation to prepare for worship and to overcome persecution. In chapters four and five we see the picture of heavenly worship. We can learn why and how God and Christ are worshiped in heaven. We participate in this worship. This can be our model of worship.

I. Worship God because he is the Holy, Almighty Creator (4:1-11)

In this part, John is taken up before the very throne of God. This is not heaven coming down and filling one's soul with glory. It is John going up to heaven where God's glory fills everything. The first thing John mentions is a throne with someone sitting on it. A throne symbolizes the majesty and power of a king. Thrones evoke reverence and humility from those who would approach. And rightly so. This King, at a word, has power to create, destroy, and judge everything in all creation. His power and majesty are manifest. Verse 5 says, “From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.” When we come to worship God, we must realize we are approaching the great King of the universe. It is easy for us to be too casual in our attitude toward God. Our inner attitude, and the outward manifestation should reflect the faith that we are coming before the King. We must come on time, properly dressed and with humble reverence. It is interesting that John never calls God by name. He calls him “the one seated on the throne” again and again (4:2,3,9,10; 5:1,7). John was awestruck by the power and majesty of God. John proclaims that God reigns over the universe from his throne.

Look at verse 3. “And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.” Perhaps the image here is that of light shining through crystal, as when brilliant light flows through a prism producing a spectrum of color that dazzles our mind's eye with its beauty. If we turn the prism just slightly, it produces a whole new array of color, diverting its shafts in myriad directions. The emerald rainbow suggests greenness that represents life; life that issues forth from God, the Source of life. The absence of God is sometimes described as a desert. God's presence brings life; flourishing, growing, abundant life. Moreover, the rainbow reminds us of God's covenant with Noah. God promised not to destroy the world with a flood again, even though man is evil. God remembers and keeps this promise faithfully. Thunder and lightning recall the covenant with Moses to make his people a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God keeps this covenant even though his people are often unfaithful. This is the God of the covenant. Though he is Almighty God, he has limited himself through covenant promises to mere men. God does not exercise his mighty power at random, as a spoiled prince might do. God reigns over his creation according to his covenant promises.

When we survey chapter four as a whole, we find that it describes a worship service in heaven. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads (4). Most likely, they represent the twelve tribes and the apostles. They are the redeemed of the Lord throughout all ages. They have been sanctified and given glory and authority from God. Then, in the center, around the throne, were four living creatures. They were covered with eyes, in front and back, and they had six wings.

These four living creatures are, in a sense, worship leaders. On their cue, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him. Now we can understand why the living creatures needed so many eyes. Consider our chorus and orchestra conductor, Jim Rarick. As he conducts, his eyes dart back and forth, from one section to another, and he works hard to keep everything in harmony to produce the most beautiful choral performance. However, since he has eyes only in the front of his head, he cannot see the musicians and audience at

once. He needs eyes in the back of his head. These living creatures always see God, and the assembly before them simultaneously. They always know if God is pleased or not. They see everyone, even the person who tries to hide in the back, and they engage him in worship. The eyes under their wings suggest that nothing is hidden in the worship service. They seem to be equidistant from each other, to form a kind of “surround sound” effect of worship and praise. The living creatures lead others by first worshipping God themselves. As they give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne, the twenty-four elders fall down before God and worship him willingly.

Consider the elders. As they fall down, they yield all of their authority and power to God, recognizing God’s supremacy. They lay their crowns before the throne as they worship (10b). These crowns represent the church triumphant. God has given victory to his church in accomplishing its purpose. This victory has come through many individual battles and through the church’s corporate struggle as well. Finally the church’s victory is given back to God. This is part of worship. This is why we must overcome the world and render victory and glory to God in our personal lives and as a church.

We can learn why God is worshiped in this way by listening to the worshipers. The living creatures say, in verse 8b, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty....” These creatures proclaim God’s holiness. This is the distinctive feature which overwhelms them. Holiness is that quality of God’s character that completely transcends his creation; we cannot fully understand it. To scratch the surface, we can say that God is absolutely perfect in his morality, ethics and spirituality. His motive is always right; his knowledge is perfect; his character flawless. Just think about how many decisions God has made. Not once did he ever make a wrong decision, in spite of Satan’s mischief and man’s sinfulness. God has governed the whole created world with perfect wisdom to accomplish his own purpose. God’s holiness is like a consuming fire. It breaks out against impurity and imperfection (Ex 19:22,24). No human being can approach God at random. We must come before him humbly and with a repentant heart. We must be ready to receive conviction of sins which we are too dull to be aware of. When we see someone who always keeps time, we are convicted of our laziness in being late. Likewise, when we stand before the holy God, all of our imperfections and sins are exposed. We need a warning about his holiness. The living creatures help us be alert. Recognizing God’s holiness and repenting of our sins is essential in worship. By the way, anyone who was late today should repent and decide to come on time. The living creatures said, “who was, and is, and is to come.” God is eternal in nature. God has always existed, he exists now, and he will always exist. He exists in and of himself without help from anyone. All other creatures are dependent on something else. But God is different. God is absolutely independent.

The elders’ words of worship are recorded in verse 11. They say, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” God created all things, including each person’s life. God did this by his own will. He did not act as anyone’s agent; God made all things by his own free choice to do so. God did not need to make us. God has everything he needs in his own being. The created world is to God like a garment that he wears for a while (Ps 102:26). He can change it and put on another one as he pleases. Why do each of us have life? It is because God decided to give us life. We exist purely out of God’s kindness and grace. This is why we worship God, our Creator; we are compelled by realizing his holiness, power, goodness, and grace. The last part of verse 11 says that we have our being in God. Our true identity is in God. When we know God and find ourselves in God, we can find out who we truly are. This comes when we worship God. There are many who don’t know their own identity in God. They only know their parents’ identity or a friend’s identity or that of a sinsick world. The wonderful truth here is that when we worship God, we find our own being in God, that is, who we really are. May God bless you to worship God with all your heart in this year and discover your true identity in God.

II. Worship Christ because he is our Redeemer (5:1-14)

In chapter 5:1, John’s attention is drawn to the right hand of him who sits on the throne. In his right hand, he holds a scroll. This scroll contains the decree of the sovereign Ruler of all. It is the written will of God. But it is sealed with seven seals. No one knows what is written in the scroll except God alone. Then a mighty angel steps forward and says, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” None of the angels dare to step forward. No human being dares step forward. Science and technology cannot help us here; neither can philosophy or psychology. John begins to weep. He has a burning desire to know God’s will, but he is utterly helpless. Have you ever wept out of a deep desire to know God’s will? We need someone who is worthy to open the scroll for us. Who can do so? Look at verse 5. “Then one of the elders said to him, ‘Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David,

has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” This refers to Jesus Christ. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, a prophetic reference to the conquering Messiah (Ge 49:8-12). Christ is the one who reveals God’s will to his people.

Look at verse 6. “Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” Although Jesus is called the Lion by the elder, John sees a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne. Jesus is both the Lion and the Lamb. John the Baptist had called Jesus, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). This refers to Jesus’ sacrifice of atonement for us. When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain of separation between God and man was torn in two. Mankind was reconciled to God. From the throne of the Father God, through the Lamb of God, the Spirit is poured out into all the earth. The Spirit draws men to God the Father through Jesus Christ. Christ is the Mediator who opens the way to God by the power of the Spirit.

After the Lamb takes the scroll, another wave of praise and worship breaks forth. This wave is directed to the Lamb by the living creatures and the elders. They recognize that the Lamb is the only one in all creation who can fulfill God’s salvation plan and redeem his creation. True worship of the Lamb requires us to recognize this: Christ is the only one in all creation who can save us. When they realized this, they fell down before him. They also offered up intercessory prayer to God for the salvation of mankind. Intercessory prayer is an important part of worship. Then they take out their harps and sing a new song. Praise music and vocal teams and choruses are an important part of worship. Look at verses 9-10. “And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’”

The redemption of the Lamb is truly great. Christ saves men from every tribe and language and people and nation. Christ saves people from Africa, Asia, Oceania, South America, Europe and North America. Christ’s changing power makes selfish people become sacrificial people, proud people become humble people, corrupted people become holy people. Christ’s redemption produces a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in fulfillment of God’s unchanging hope and purpose.

As the great redemption wrought by the Lamb is revealed, another wave of praise and worship breaks forth. The angels in heaven, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand encircle the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sing: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Then another wave of praise breaks forth. Let’s read verses 13-14. “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’ The four living creatures said, ‘Amen,’ and the elders fell down and worshiped.”

Today we have caught a glimpse of the worship of God and of Christ in heaven. Let’s accept this as our model of worship. Let’s pray that in this new year we may worship God our Creator and Christ our Redeemer in a way that pleases him, that he may dwell among us.