

Revelation 4

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Do you ever use the word heavenly in your everyday conversation?

It's a word that you employ. It's the kind of word you might hear spoken in a period drama, where the lemon sponge served for afternoon tea is deemed by all to qualify as heavenly.

The word or the use given it just sounds a bit twee or even a little pretentious. However, the frequent misuse of the word is no reason not to use it in its proper context and with its proper meaning.

Something is heavenly if it corresponds to or describes heaven. This morning I want to reflect on a heavenly matter.

Namely, heavenly worship. I wonder if that term that I've just pronounced, heavenly worship, I wonder if the very term or expression sounds a little otherworldly and detached from the real world that we live in, our everyday life and its challenges.

[1 : 19] Well, the term heavenly worship may sound otherworldly. It may sound very distant, maybe even irrelevant.

It is anything but. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And as we are afforded a glimpse of heaven in John's vision that we've read, what do we discover to be the business of heaven?

In what way is God's will done in heaven? Well, in heaven, God is worshipped. In heaven, God is worshipped.

John shares with us a scene of heavenly worship. And the purpose of this glimpse of heaven is not principally to satisfy our curiosity as to what heaven is like.

It's not even principally to whet our appetite for that day when we will cross the Jordan, to use another kind of old-fashioned expression.

[2 : 28] But rather the purpose is to show us how to worship God in the here and now. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

How does our worship of God match up to heavenly worship? How about the worship we offer as a congregation or the worship you offer to God in your life as a believer?

Is it heavenly worship? Is it similar to, is it marked by the characteristics of worship that we discover and witness in heaven?

Worship is, after all, what we have been created and redeemed for. To worship God in everything we do with everything we have.

That is our reason for being. To worship God in everything we do with everything we have. So let's explore and discover what worship in heaven is like.

[3 : 30] And as we do, let's examine and challenge ourselves that we might worship God on earth as He is worshipped in heaven. And what I want to do is identify five key characteristics of worship in heaven.

Now, I don't for a moment claim that this is an exhaustive list of the characteristics of worship that we can find in this chapter. I'm sure if you read through the chapter, through that prism, as it were, of looking for characteristics of heavenly worship, you might be able to come up with a much more extensive list.

But I'm focusing in, or I'm focusing in, on five key characteristics that we can consider and reflect on this morning. And the first one that I want to begin with is this, that worship in heaven is for everyone.

Worship in heaven is for everyone. Now, John's vision of heaven in this chapter is not exhaustive. It's not intended to be exhaustive. And there are residents of heaven, and notably the redeemed or the church triumphant, as they're sometimes described, who are not introduced to us just yet.

But all those that we do meet in this chapter are united in this one core matter. They worship God. Everybody worships the one seated on the throne.

[4 : 55] Worship in heaven is for everyone. But who do we meet in this chapter? It's all very well saying that everybody we meet worships God, and that is true.

But who do we meet? Well, really there are two groups, I suppose we could call them, that we meet in this chapter. First of all, there are the 24 elders, who are spoken of there in verse 4.

And then we also meet the four living creatures, who we are introduced to in the second half of verse 6. And let's look at each in turn and try to identify who they are and who they represent.

So first of all, the 24 elders. Now the identity of the 24 elders is much debated. There in verse 4, surrounding the throne were 24 other thrones, and seated on them were 24 elders.

Now who are they? As I say, there is some debate, or much debate, as to who they are. But I think the debate narrows down to two possibilities. There are others, but we'll narrow it down to two.

[6 : 04] Some argue that the 24 elders are glorified believers who serve to represent the totality of God's people. Twelve of the elders, twelve of the 24, represent the twelve tribes of Israel, or the twelve patriarchs.

And the other twelve represent the twelve apostles. So it is argued. Now this is plausible, especially in the light of how the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles are elsewhere identified in Revelation, particularly in Revelation chapter 21.

If you're following the study guide at the same pace as we are in the Central Neighborhood Fellowship, well, that's what we were looking at this past Wednesday, that chapter where the New Jerusalem is described, and the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem bear the names of the twelve tribes, and the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem bear the names of the twelve apostles.

And so it suggests, well, here we come across the number 24, and it seems plausible to conclude that the 24 represents these two groups of twelve.

The twelve patriarchs, the twelve tribes, and the twelve apostles. Now one difficulty with this plausible way of identifying the 24 elders is that in what follows in Revelation, the 24 elders are on more than one occasion distinguished from the redeemed.

[7 : 36] And that would suggest that they are other than the redeemed. To just give one example, a couple of chapters on in chapter 7, and verse 13 we read, then one of the elders asked me, and we take it that the elder here is one of the 24 that is mentioned in chapter 4.

Then one of the elders asked me, these in white robes, who are they, and where did they come from? And the elder is asking about the redeemed. And the implication is, well, if he's asking about the redeemed, then he is not one of the redeemed.

So, it would seem, or that would seem reasonable to conclude. So, that's one way of understanding who they are. That the other possibility is that the 24 elders are angels.

And again, this is possible. Heaven is full of angels. Though possible, this interpretation also faces a difficulty. Perhaps the principal difficulty is that the title elders is not used elsewhere of angels.

It seems to correspond more to men. Now, one way of combining the two interpretations, and I'm not saying that that's what we have to do, but one way of combining the two would be to see the 24 elders as angels, but angels who serve to represent the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles, which would then explain the use of that unangelic title, elder, given that they're representing those who could be described as elders.

[9 : 09] To be frank, and we could continue exploring this for many hours, but to be frank, it's not that important, it seems to me, to definitively identify the 24 elders.

What is important to observe, certainly for the purposes that we have this morning, is that whoever they are, they are worshiping God. Everyone in heaven worships God.

Well, that's the 24 elders. What about the four living creatures who we meet in verse 6? In the second half of the verse, we read in the center around the throne were four living creatures.

They were covered with eyes in front and behind. The first living creature was like a lion. The second was like an ox. The third had a face like a man. And the fourth was like a flying eagle. And the description continues.

These four creatures, and here there is a settled consensus and unanimity about who they are, or rather who they represent.

[10 : 12] These creatures represent all of animate creation. All creatures, great and small, including us, men and women, and boys and girls. And what are these creatures who represent all life on earth doing?

Well, you know what I'm going to say now. What are they doing? They are worshiping God. Worship in heaven is for everyone. The angels worship God.

The redeemed worship God. The living creatures worship God. But what can we draw from this heavenly panorama of total participation in worship for us down here today?

Well, let me suggest three things. I think we can draw from this a personal challenge, a missionary imperative, and an exciting prospect. First of all, a personal challenge.

This reality of heavenly worship as being worship in which everybody, everyone participates, that constitutes for you a personal challenge.

[11 : 18] If we are to replicate on earth worship in heaven, then everyone starts with one. The word everyone, it can be broken into two, and the second half of it is the word one.

We won't have everyone worshiping on earth, as is the case in heaven, if you are not joining in. This is a personal challenge to each of us.

We all have to begin with ourselves. And we'll see that it goes beyond that, but it has to begin there. We need to be part of that everyone who worships a God.

But of course, it goes beyond that, and that's where we have this missionary imperative. The reality, of course, is that not everybody on earth is worshiping God. There we see a great difference between earth and heaven.

In heaven, everybody is worshiping God. That is not the case here on earth. You don't need me to tell you that. Not everybody in Aberdeen is worshiping God.

[12 : 18] But we are persuaded in the light of God's word that they ought to be. It is our desire that everybody worship God. We sang at the beginning of our service this morning the words of the psalmist, come let us, everyone, bow down before God.

The call, the invitation is to all that there would be this reflection of heaven as everyone joins in the worship of the living and true God.

God is worthy of the worship of all. And how will they worship those who today are not worshipping? How will they discover this God who is worthy of worship?

How will they experience the love of God that is the fuel and motor of worship? Well, we need to tell them about Jesus. We need to do what Jesus told His disciples to do, what He told the men of Galilee long ago to do, and the command comes down to us.

You will be my witnesses. And so this scene of total participation is a personal challenge, or we can draw from it a personal challenge.

[13 : 23] It certainly constitutes a missionary imperative. But it's also an exciting prospect that the vision that we are given, especially when we think about the four creatures, representing all of animate creation, worshipping God in heaven.

And I think these four creatures are perhaps intended to alert us to the wide-reaching scope of God's redemptive purposes. It's not just about us.

God's redemption encompasses all of creation. And we're given an insight into this reality, and when we read what Paul has to say about this in Romans 8, and verses 19 to 21.

Again, this is a passage that was made reference to in the final lesson of the study guide on Revelation that some of you will perhaps remember.

Let's just listen to what Paul has to say about the manner in which God's redemptive purposes extend beyond just men and women, just us. We are, because God is so determined that at the center of His redemptive purposes, but His purposes extend beyond just us.

[14 : 35] Let's just get a hint of that as we read what Paul has to say there in Romans 8, reading from verse 19. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

And that exciting prospect is perhaps hinted at or reflected in these four living creatures representing all of animate creation, freed from bondage, liberated from bondage, worshipping their Creator, worshipping the one seated on the throne.

There's one other detail that catches my eye as I reflect on worship in heaven being for everyone. Namely, that heavenly worship seems to be almost contagious in character.

I wonder if you notice the way John described what is going on there at the beginning of verse 9. We read there in verse 9, whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to Him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him.

[15 : 52] You see the kind of the order of events. You know, you have the living creatures bringing glory to God and it's almost as if their worship then draws in the elders and they too join in.

There's this contagious quality to worship in heaven. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Is that true of our worship?

Does it have that contagious quality to it that we would draw others in to join with us in the worship of God? Well, let's move on and more briefly look at a couple of the other characteristics.

The second thing I want you to notice is that worship in heaven is all-consuming and all-encompassing. Particularly, notice what is said there in verse 8 of the four living creatures.

Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all round, even under its wings. And then particularly what follows, day and night they never stop saying.

[16 : 52] And then it goes on to share the content of their praise, but particularly this truth about the four living creatures. Day and night they never stop saying. They never stop worshiping.

Worship in heaven is all-consuming and all-encompassing. It's not just that in heaven everybody worships. It's that in heaven worship occupies everybody all the time.

And this permanent, never-ending worship is never forced or routine or dull. It is eternally riveting and joyful. But how is this feature of heavenly worship that it is all-consuming and all-encompassing to be replicated on earth?

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Is that even possible? You know, we can't worship 24-7. We have stuff to do.

We have jobs to go to and classes to attend and mouths to feed and lawns to mow and groceries to buy and shirts to iron and box sets to watch and, well, you get the picture.

[18 : 00] You know, we can't worship 24-7, surely. We can't worship God in such an all-encompassing and all-consuming way. That's some level of perfection that is beyond us.

Or can we? You see, worship is not just about sung praise and prayer and gathered worship as we are participating in gathered worship this morning.

What does Paul urge us to do in Romans chapter 12 and verse 1? Let's just remind ourselves of what we read there. Romans chapter 12 and verse 1, we read, Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies or your lives as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. What Paul is saying is that the totality of our lives constitutes an act of worship or ought to, an act of worship to God.

It's not just about singing and praying and services, but everything we do and all that we are offer to God in worship. And so when we understand worship in that way, we see that it is something that can occupy all that we are.

[19 : 15] It can be all-consuming and all-encompassing. Or Paul in another context, when he's writing to the church in Corinth, and in 2 Corinthians chapter 10 and verse 31, we read how he urges them, and as he urges them, so he urges us likewise.

2 Corinthians chapter 10 and in verse 31. Now that is not right. But I know what the verse is. You know the verse where he says to the believers, whatever you do, whether you eat or drink or whatever else you do, do to the glory of God.

It captures the same idea that worship can be and ought to be that which occupies all of our time and all of our attention.

So worship in heaven is all-encompassing and all-consuming. But notice another characteristic of worship in heaven, and it is this, that worship in heaven is marked by surrender and service.

We'll start with surrender. Notice what the elders are described in doing in verse 10b. So Revelation chapter 4 and in verse 10b we read there, and we've commented on this already, they lay their crowns before the throne and say, that's a visual picture that communicates a very important truth of how these creatures, these elders, all those who reside in heaven acknowledge their dependence upon, their subjection to the one seated on the throne.

[20 : 57] They surrender themselves to Him. They lay their crowns before Him. Worship is marked by surrender to God.

And that's not a defeat, that is rather a joyful acknowledgement of who He is and who we are. We joyfully surrender to Him. This is an integral element of heavenly or God-pleasing worship, death to self, and joyful surrender to God.

But as well as surrender and these things are connected, there's also service. Notice how the living creatures are described as having wings and eyes. Why so?

Why do they have these wings? And in what way do they use these wings? Well, I think it's reasonable to conclude that they have these wings to do God's bidding, to go where God sends them.

But how do they know what God is commanding? Well, they hear the thunder. In verse 5, it speaks of coming from the throne, beals of thunder, peals of thunder, issuing from the throne.

[22 : 01] Last week, we were thinking about that as representing God, announcing His judgments and His commandments and His decrees, and the living creatures respond to the commission that they are given and serve the one who commands them.

So, they're not 24-7, if we can use the language of time, they're not 24-7 singing, but they're 24-7 worshipping as they obey what God commands.

And I think that what we draw from that for ourselves, I think, is fairly evident. You know, if you pray the Lord's Prayer, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, you are committing yourself to a life of obedience and service, to worship God as He is worshipped in heaven.

But worshipping in heaven is also directed. The fourth characteristic I want to notice, it's directed. It's directed to the one seated on the throne and to Him alone.

Now, you might feel that that is simply stating the obvious and hardly merits highlighting, but the significance of this simple truth becomes apparent when we draw the implications for ourselves down here, which is what we're trying to do.

[23 : 16] We're not just describing what's happening, we're saying, okay, that's what happens in heaven, so if that's what happens in heaven, well, that's what should be happening here. And so we want to draw these implications.

And we see that in heaven that the worship is all directed to the one seated on the throne. Now, that's particularly relevant for us because down here, unlike in heaven, there are many would-be deities and idols competing for your loyalty and worship.

Now, for the original recipients of the letter, the empire itself demanded undiluted loyalty and worship even. It's possible that the four creatures in heaven are intended to remind us of those who down here seek to usurp God's place and demand our worship or seduce our affection.

We think of the eagle particularly, the flying eagle, one of the four living creatures. And we know, of course, that the figure of the eagle was a ubiquitous symbol of Roman power and hegemony across the empire, visible for all to see.

And yet, in heaven, the flying eagle gladly bows before the throne of God. What idols clamor for your worship, for your loyalty, for your adherence?

[24 : 38] An idol need not be made of gold or silver, but is anything or anybody who occupies the place of priority in your life that God deserves and demands. Be sure that your worship is directed to God, to God alone, to the one seated on the throne.

That is what we discover in heaven and that is how it ought to be down here. But then finally, let me just notice one further characteristic of heavenly worship and it is this.

Worship in heaven is God glorifying. Now again, this might appear self-evident and yet we need to stress this aspect of heavenly worship and in particular as we focus on the content of praise in heaven.

The praise that is directed to God is at the heart of this chapter. We haven't even mentioned it as yet. There in verses 8 and verses 11 we find heavenly praise, the words that the elders and the creatures employ to praise a God.

One thing that we can just mention about this heavenly praise is that the praise serves to interpret the vision for us. When we look at the vision we say, well what truths about God does the vision reveal?

[25 : 58] It's not that difficult to find the answer because in the praise we find the answer. We find the answer in the words of praise directed to God by the living creatures and the elders. What do we discover about God in this chapter?

We'll look at the words of the praise. We discover that he's holy. We discover that he's almighty. We discover that he's eternal and we could go on. The words very explicitly interpret the vision for us.

Well let's just very briefly look at the content of heavenly praise and what it tells us about the one seated on the throne. There in verse 8 we're told about the living creatures what they say day and night.

Holy, holy, holy. God is all holy. In the Bible where God's name is mentioned it is qualified by the adjective holy more often than by all other adjectives put together.

And so it's not surprising that the living creatures as they begin to proclaim their praise they home in on this reality concerning God the one seated on the throne all together holy all together pure all together without anything that is wrong or untoward all together other holy holy holy and he is all powerful is the Lord God almighty is the God over all the God who governs supreme over all and God is eternal who was and is and is to come and in the language of the one who was and is and is to come we hear the echoes of the divine name Yahweh explained to Moses in Exodus chapter 3 and then we also have of course God's self description in this book of Revelation chapter 1 and verse 8 God pronounces I am the Alpha and the Omega says the Lord

[27 : 54] God who is and who was and who is to come the Almighty and so the living creatures pick up on the language that God himself employs to describe himself and they use God's own words to praise God holy holy holy is the Lord God almighty who was and is and is to come but in verse 11 we have the elders joining in the praise and how do they address God as they praise him what do we learn about God from their words of praise well what stands out at the very beginning is that God is worthy and when we think about this first expression there in verse 11 you are worthy our Lord and God we need to just pause for a moment and see how it would seem very deliberately there is a polemic dig being taken at the emperor and the empire and let me explain why we can say that there in verse 11 where we read you are worthy it's the only occasion in the new testament of the Greek word *axios* translated worthy being used of God but it would have been very familiar to John's original audience as a word used of the emperor the emperor was deemed to be *axios* or worthy but there's more the title that follows our Lord and our God notice there in verse 11 you are worthy our Lord and our God the title there is the Greek equivalent of the Latin *dominus et deus noster* now

Suetonius who was a Roman historian who was a contemporary of John who wrote the time that this revelation was given to John he tells us that the emperor Domitian who was the emperor at this time insisted on the formal adoption of this exact title in his lifetime so when we read there in verse 11 you are worthy our Lord and God these words are the exact words that Domitian was saying to all his subjects you must use as you address me that's how you must address me you are worthy emperor our Lord and our God and so even in heaven there is this very telling dig at the folly of human emperors in attributing to themselves worth and honor that they are not due and so those original readers of this letter as they read those words would be very tellingly reminded that there is only one worthy of all honor and glory and praise not the emperor but God alone he is worthy the message is clear the only one worthy of worship is our

Lord and God but why is he worthy well we're told for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being God not only created the universe but graciously sustains his universe day by day this truth alone establishes his worthiness to be worshipped but we know that there's more much more very especially his eternal and self-giving love for God so loved the world this God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son to be our savior to die for us why is he worthy well he is worthy for so many reasons some of which are referenced in these words of praise and what is he worthy of well we read there in verse 11 you are worthy our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power how can we render glory and honor and power to God can we give him anything that he does not already possess is he not already all glorious and all honorable and all powerful well yes he is but in our praise we acknowledge and celebrate

God for who he is we don't make him more than he is we don't grant to him anything that he doesn't already own and enjoy but we acknowledge who he is and what he is we acknowledge his glory and honor and power we joyfully give thanks to God for the manifestation of his glory and honor and power in our favor your will be done on earth as it is in heaven may our praise ever be God glorifying in its content and expression and sincerity may we ever lift up the one who is eternally lifted up and yet who born of love came down to save us so there you have it a worship audit in the light of this vision of heaven heavenly worship as our bar or template heavenly worship is for everyone your will be done on earth as it is in heaven heavenly worship is all consuming and all encompassing your will be done on earth as it is in heaven heavenly worship is marked by surrender and service your will be done on earth as it is in heaven heavenly worship is directed to God and to God alone. Your will be done on earth and in our lives as it is in heaven.

And heavenly worship is God glorifying. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. May we today and always worship God as He is worshiped around the throne in heaven. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come and we acknowledge you to be the God who is holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, the one who was and is and is to come. Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive honor and praise and glory. Help us to worship you as we ought. Help us to worship you in a manner that is pleasing to you and as it is pleasing to you that it would be a blessing to us. Help us as we pray your will be done on earth as it is in heaven to have a sense, a grasp of all that that implies and indeed all that that demands of us. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.