

# The Conquering Christ

Message 3

## *Heavenly Worship*

Revelation 4:1-5:14

### *Call to Worship*

Do you know what it is like to work hard, faithfully doing everything given to you, yet finishing without distinction? Perhaps it was a course you really liked. You labored industriously, handed in all the homework, but then bombed on the final exam. Or perhaps you played hard in the game, scoring goals, making baskets, and outwitting your opponents. But then when you had the chance to score the winning points the ball went up, up, up, too far up, over the net – and your moment of glory turned into a huge disappointment. Say, that is probably how the Chicago Bears felt Sunday night! I wonder if that is how John felt. He was one of the twelve apostles. He walked with Jesus. He heard Jesus preach. He ate with Jesus! He saw Jesus die and he saw Him alive. John was one of a very few blessed with such an intimate relationship with Jesus. Then Jesus commissioned him along with the other twelve apostles to proclaim the gospel of freedom from sin and life in Jesus to the world. John faithfully did that – first in Jerusalem, and then in Ephesus where he served as pastor to the church that Paul had established. But now – now John is exiled to a penal colony. His last days are among criminals. He can take comfort in knowing that he was faithful to his Lord and Master. He never wavered in the face of persecution. But now he is separated from his friends, unable to continue the work Jesus gave him to do. It must have seemed a pathetic way to end his life.

But then one Lord's Day John heard a massive voice, a voice like a trumpet – and when he turned around he saw Jesus! Jesus, whom he had not seen for 30 years! But what a sight He was. Jesus is no longer the ordinary-looking preacher. Now He shines in astonishing brilliance and bears invincible weapons. John was so overwhelmed by the sight of the heavenly Jesus, he fell over as dead. Only the healing touch of Jesus enabled John to look on the man he knew and served for so long. No one has ever seen something so wonderful, so amazing, so glorious as Jesus. But John is about to see something even more wonderful. Now Jesus calls to John, and ushers him into heaven itself. John is about to see what a bare handful of men have ever seen. He is entering the sanctuary – God's throne room.

As we take this tour of heaven, we will see many things which have been revealed before. Of special interest are the books of Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. Each contain important previews of heaven. But now we see the whole thing laid out before us.

### *The Glory of God*

John's gaze immediately rests on the central figure in heaven – one seated on a throne. This is it folks, the Center of the Universe, the Definition of Reality, the Origin of Everything, the Ruler of Time and Space, the Architect of Language and Music a Person so infinite, so beautiful, so perfect that He cannot be described. John finds no words to convey the sight of God. All he can say is that it was like Jasper and Carnelian. Jasper is white and carnelian is red. Perhaps they symbolize purity and judgment, but the primary meaning is the dazzling, indescribable brilliance of God. This is the most beautiful, most irresistible person John has ever seen – too beautiful and wonderful for any human words. This splendid figure is seated on a throne. We are in the sanctuary – the throne room of all reality. Here is where God directs the affairs of all people, all creatures, the forces of nature, and the course of history. From this throne come the decrees that determine all.

In awe John's gaze moves about the place. Over the throne was an emerald rainbow. Or perhaps it was a halo around the throne. Either is possible. If a rainbow, it is a reminder that God promised never again to destroy the earth with a flood, as He did in the days of Noah. If a halo, it is a further manifestation of the brilliance of God's throne. Lightning flashed from the throne and thunder shook the place. Fire burned in

front of the throne. This is what the Israelites saw and heard when they met God at Mount Sinai. The trumpet, lightning, thunder, and fire were so terrifying, they begged Moses not to make them hear God's voice. "You go talk to Him," they said. "We'll wait right here at the foot of the mountain." Now we see that the fire was not just a stage effect, but was the Spirit of God sent out into the earth. Somehow God's Spirit is also seven Spirits. This is a mystery. The overall picture is no mystery, though. God is beyond amazing. His throne is awesome, wonderfully frightening, stunningly beautiful, dazzlingly powerful – and God is indescribable.

Around the throne are 24 other thrones. These thrones are occupied by elders clothed in white and crowned in gold. Angels are never called elders elsewhere in scripture, but the context shows this is what they must be. These are the courtiers of the heavenly court. They assist the king in ruling the universe. They also have authority, as the thrones and crowns indicate. Why are there 24 elders? Most people suppose they represent the twelve patriarchs of the Old Covenant and the twelve apostles of the New. I think this is correct, but we should notice they are the heavenly counterpart to the 24 groups of priests and Levites listed in 1 Chronicles 24-25 who served in the temple.

Angels we understand – or think we do. But the four living creatures are bizarre. Ezekiel 10:20 identifies them as cherubim – a certain type of angel. They are the guardians of the throne – rather like the Swiss Guard in the Vatican, or the Secret Service for our president. Of course God is not so fragile that He needs to be guarded by created beings. As this passage indicates, they are mainly involved in worship. Their purpose is to glorify God by adding to the majesty of His court. Ezekiel pictures these creatures flying through the air carrying God's chariot-throne. Remember that God sent cherubim to guard the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve were barred from entering there. Gold cherubim were installed in the holiest place in the temple, and cherubim were woven into the curtain surrounding the tabernacle. These earthly pictures reflect the heavenly original – real beings of tremendous power, wisdom, and authority who stand closest to the throne of God. They see all over the earth with their many eyes and fly everywhere with their six wings. The four animals reveal the glory of God as no one image can convey. The lion is the King of the Jungle, the ox is domestic power, the eagle is the most majestic of the birds, and man is ruler over all animals.<sup>1</sup> They represent strength, service, intelligence, and swiftness.<sup>2</sup> All that is good about the universe stands in praise of God.

God is enthroned in dazzling brilliance and surrounded by an awesome court. He is so wonderful, those who see Him clearly fall down in worship. It is only we men whose eyes are clouded by sin and hardly see God who can live without worshiping the great Creator. In heaven the four mighty cherubim lead the liturgy with a variation of the song of the seraphim that Isaiah saw:

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come!”

Then the 24 elder angels join in praising the God who imagined, made, and rules this wonderful universe:

“Worthy are you, 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.”

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<sup>1</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2000) p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1967) p. 87.

Awesome!

### ***The Glory of the Lamb***

After John took all this in, he became aware of a hand extending from the person on the throne. There is a scroll in the hand. The scroll is full, with writing on both sides of the parchment. Along the edge it is sealed with seven wax seals, In those days it was customary to seal an important document by rolling it up, tying with a string, dribbling wax on the edge, and pressing a seal into the wax. No one was allowed to open the document except the one to whom it was sent. He alone could break the seals and read it. As Revelation unfolds it becomes clear that the scroll, in the hand of God, is the plan for completing our redemption.

Nothing sustains hope in trying circumstances like knowing there is an end. Classes may be long and exhausting, but in a few months they will be over. Conversely, there is no despair so deep as the knowledge that there will be no end. The Sisyphus myth is powerful because we all can relate to the horror of having to haul a huge rock up a mountain only to have it fall back down, and to do this for all eternity. As long as there was hope that there was an end, the early Christians could hold on. Jesus said He would return. He promised to destroy His enemies, and this hope gave courage to John and his companions. But what if deliverance was stalled? What if the plan of redemption was halted? Would John and his friends suffer forever, with no hope of relief? Would all their suffering for Jesus be for nothing? It is enough to make you cry in despair, frustration, and anguish.

John sees the plan of redemption right there in God's hand. All that remains is to open and implement it. But no one was worthy to open it. The angels searched heaven and earth. The cherubim flew into the farthest reaches of the universe, but no one was worthy. After all this, John breaks down in uncontrollable weeping. Was his whole life a waste?

But no! There is someone! (Trumpet fanfare.) And now, presenting at the end of the ages, on center stage – the Lion of Judah! The Lion is worthy to open the scroll, for He has conquered. What good news! When John is at the point of despair, this magnificent creature comes to the rescue. Of course the hero should be a lion. The Lion is King of the Beasts, so we might have expected that he would be a candidate for this job. Furthermore, the tribe of Judah was the lion tribe. When Jacob blessed his sons, this is what he said about Judah:

Judah is a lion's cub;  
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.  
He stooped down; he crouched as a lion  
and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?  
The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,  
until tribute comes to him;  
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Genesis 49:9-10

And as Jacob's blessing prophesied, Judah is the royal tribe. From her came the kings that sat on God's throne in Jerusalem. In Judah rested the hope that a son of David would someday come to save Israel and rule again. Jesus came as this son of David, and received the Kingdom of His Father. When He ascended to heaven, He sat down on the throne of God, as the book of Hebrews plainly tells us. "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high... 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.'" (Hebrews 1:3, 8) But there is more! Jesus was not only from the royal tribe, and is presently the reigning King – He is also the Root of

David. He is the source of David's line of kings. Jesus created this world and placed man on it. In Colossians we read,

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:16-17)

So Jesus is simultaneously the creator and offspring of David. Jesus is the first and the last! And now this great conquering Lion has arrived to complete what He began when He was on earth. The end of our salvation is here, and He will open the seals. We hold our breaths as we prepare to be awed by a vast lion, golden mane flowing from side to side, casting golden beams around the room. We wait for Him to open His mouth and roar with a mighty voice – a voice that commands all worlds and shakes the universe down to its sub-atomic particles. Here He comes – our hero!

But when John looked in the direction of this great Lion, there was no lion at all. There was nothing but a murdered Lamb! Where is the Lion who will save us from our enemies? The Lion who will bring to an end all struggle and suffering? The Lion who rules heaven and earth? Where is the mighty roar which we expect to announce the end of our salvation? Why do we have a silent lamb, murdered and bloody? Is this some trick? Is God laughing at us? Or did Satan defeat God after all?

John looks in unbelief at this scene, as the lamb goes to the throne and takes the scroll from Him who sits there. Then the whole court bursts into song. The living creatures and the elders take golden harps and bowls of incense. They fall down before the lamb and sing:

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
for you were slain,  
and by your blood you ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,  
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth.”

Here is the central mystery of the Christian faith. Jesus is the conquering King. Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. But His method of conquering was to die. Only by becoming a Lamb and die could He win the war.

Most of us here tonight know that Jesus died to save us from our sins. This is true. When Jesus hung on the cross God credited Him with our sins. Jesus, perfect Son of God and Son of Man, became vile in God's sight. The guilt of all our sins was upon Him, and God abhorred Him. So as He promised from the beginning of the world, God punished Him who was guilty of sin – and that was Jesus when He hung on the cross. Now that the death sentence has been carried out, we are free. Whoever believes in Jesus bears his guilt no more. God's anger is satisfied, We who formerly were God's enemies now have peace with God, and He has adopted us as His children.

But Jesus accomplished far more on the cross than paying the penalty for our sins. Jesus also conquered sin and Satan. Sin is a power that controls unbelievers. They are enslaved by sin and are unable to serve God. Romans 6:17-18 says this: “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” Jesus conquered sin and set us free from its power so that we who believe can really serve God. Jesus also conquered Satan by His death. As we shall see later in Revelation, Satan no longer has the power he once had on earth. What is more, Jesus' death ushered in

a whole new world. As He hung dying, the old world tore apart and a new one was born. That is why the sun went dark and the earth quaked. God put out the lights and torn down the old world. When Jesus rose on the first day of the week, it was the beginning of a new world. All these things will unfold further as we study Revelation.

The mystery of the Christian faith is that victory comes through death. When Jesus died He satisfied God's justice for our sin, He broke the power of sin, He crippled the activity of Satan, and he ushered in a whole new world. Satan thought that death was the end, but death was His ultimate weapon. Now Jesus lives for ever, the victorious Lamb who is simultaneously the Lion of Judah. We who are followers of Jesus also conquer. Remember Jesus' promise in each of the letters to the seven churches? He promised wonderful things to those who conquer. Now we see that our supreme weapon – the nuclear bomb of spiritual warfare – is death. We also will see more of this later in Revelation.

Is this the Jesus you worship – the magnificent Lion, the dead Lamb? Is your Jesus a conqueror – or do believe in Him only to save you from the punishment for your sin? Or do you believe in Jesus only because such belief makes your life easier? The real Jesus is far more wonderful than you can imagine. When you see the real Jesus, you cannot help but worship. And so as the Lamb is revealed, worship spreads throughout all creation, as all angels, every man and woman, all animals, every bird and fish – the octopuses and worms – every bubbling brook and exploding volcano – every quark and muon in the universe – all creation reverberates in a lion's roar of overpowering praise to the Lamb who conquered by death.

### ***The Glory of Worship***

The application of today's scripture is simple. In fact I hope you are even now applying this passage by worshipping Jesus in your hearts. This is the central activity of mankind. Worship is what we were made for, so worship is our most fulfilling activity. This passage also provides some guidance as to how we may worship best here on earth.

It may seem obvious that we may worship best by following the heavenly pattern. But if it is not obvious, scripture explicitly tells us so. We are going to look briefly into the book of Hebrews now. These two books, Hebrews and Revelation, are the worship manual for the New Covenant. Hebrews 8:5 says this about the Jewish priests: "They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.'" The book of Exodus tells us that Moses went up on Mount Sinai and met God. There God gave him the instructions for building the tabernacle – the tent where the Israelites worshiped until they built the temple. This tabernacle – and later the temple – were built as a copy of heaven. That is why they have a throne room guarded by cherubim, and a seven-branched lamp, and God's word and the bread of heaven and the scepter of rule, and other objects. Now here is an important point. People often think that Revelation, and similar books, were written using the features of the temple as symbols to help us understand heaven. This is entirely backwards. John did not describe heaven in terms of the temple – the temple was built in imitation of heaven. The tabernacle and temple were earthly copies of the throne room of heaven, and the worship there was an imitation of the worship in heaven. This is always God's plan. Our worship is not supposed to be some performance that we think up to please God. Our worship is a joining of the heavenly worship.

This point is made clearer if you turn to Hebrews 12, verses 18-24

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest<sup>19</sup> and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.<sup>20</sup> For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I

tremble with fear.”<sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,<sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,<sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Here we have a contrast between Old Covenant worship and New Covenant worship. Before Jesus came, God’s people met Him at a mountain. There they saw a shadow of the trumpet, fire, and voice of heaven. Even though this was only an earthly manifestation of the heavenly glory, they were terrified. But now when we worship we no longer assemble at a mountain or in a temple on earth. When we worship we assemble with the angels in heaven. Of course this is not something that you see with your earthly eyes. That is the whole purpose of the book of Hebrews – to explain unseen spiritual realities. But just because something is not physically visible does not make it untrue. The Jews who received this letter were beginning to ask themselves, why are we gathering here in this crowded house to sing hymns and hear this pastor speak, when we could be worshipping at the glorious temple in Jerusalem with the professional Levitical choirs? And the temple *was* glorious. It was one of the marvels of the ancient world. The answer is that New Covenant worship is far more glorious. It takes place in heaven. When a pastor ordained to serve God calls your assembly to worship, heaven and earth are joined, and we sing with the angels.

I’ll conclude with a few observations about the features of this heavenly worship. First, you see the elements of worship: a call to worship, songs of praise, reading of scripture, and prayers. Second, it is participatory and dialogical. There is dynamic interaction among the various groups assembled. One of the sparks that provoked the Reformation was that in Catholic worship at the end of the Middle Ages the people were primarily spectators. The priests and their assistants did all the reading, singing, and praying. The fact that it was in a language most people did not know made it worse. The Reformation returned worship to the people, and the Catholic church has followed somewhat in the centuries since. But there have always been Protestant churches in which there is little role for the people. The typical evangelical service in which there are a couple of hymns, a prayer by the pastor, and a lengthy sermon, may have less involvement by the people than the Catholic service. Real worship gets everybody involved. But it is not a free-for-all. Just as the cherubim lead in heaven, so the pastors lead here on earth.

Last, heavenly worship is fun and never boring. Look back over these chapters, and see all that is involved. There are angels and animals, sights and sounds, color and incense – and plenty of action. This is not the sterilized service of so many churches, where the children are shuttled off, pleasant music is performed, and everyone listens very quietly to an engaging message in a room more like living room than a sanctuary. I think that the people who may enjoy authentic worship best are children, but we exile them and turn worship into a lecture hall. Let’s bring back the children, along with colored windows, brilliant music, opportunities to move around, and perhaps even incense! Here is where evangelicals can learn from the churches that still use the historic liturgy.

Whatever else you take from tonight, here is my final word. God is more wonderful than you can imagine. Worship Him with gusto!

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