

God Is

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

God Is Holy
December 13th, 2020
Revelation 4:1-11
Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Revelation 4.

As we prepare our hearts again this year to marvel at the mystery of God with us, we are spending some time meditating on this question: Who is God?

I try not to say anything with absolute certainty unless I'm quoting a verse from the Bible, but I feel like I can say this with complete confidence: Every single person in this room has a view of God that is too small. I recently watched a video on YouTube where the shot began with a family standing on their lawn. The camera scrolled back to show the whole city, then the whole region, then the whole country, then the whole continent, then the whole planet, then the whole solar system, then the whole galaxy... You get the idea. By the time the camera is finished its retreat, you feel an overwhelming sense of your smallness – as you should. But I also found myself thinking: God made all of this with a breath! Who could even begin to fathom the immensity of His glory? What mind could even begin to comprehend Him? It reminds me of the story in Exodus 33 when Moses spoke to God on Mt. Sinai:

Moses said, "Please show me your glory."¹⁹ And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face, **for man shall not see me and live.**" (Exodus 33:18-20 ESV)

God's glory is so far beyond our comprehension that we would DIE if we saw Him! That's a little sobering, isn't it? It's similar to what we teach our kids about the sun. The sun is beautiful! It warms us and provides us with light, and it causes our food to grow. But the light of the sun is so powerful that you could actually go BLIND if you stared directly at it. I think that's a helpful analogy for what we are considering here.

God's glory is THAT glorious! You do not have the capacity to look directly at it. His holiness would consume you. We sang that last week, didn't we?

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee.
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see.
Only thou art holy. There is none beside Thee.
Perfect in power, in love and purity.¹

At this point, I think we need to stop and ask the question: What does it mean that God is holy? R.C. Sproule defines holiness in this way:

The primary meaning of holy is "separate" ... God's holiness is more than just separateness. His holiness is also transcendent... When the Bible calls God holy, it means primarily that God is transcendentally separate. He is so far above and beyond us that He seems almost totally foreign to us. To be holy is to be "other", to be different in a special way.²

To put it simply: What does it mean that God is holy? It means that he is GOD. He is OTHER. He is not like you only better. He is CATEGORICALLY different and majestic and AWESOME in every way. He is perfectly pure, and that purity cannot be tainted with sin.

This morning, as we consider the holiness of God, I want to focus in on one chapter. We're going to consider the Apostle John's vision in Revelation 4. This vision is particularly applicable for us today, because the vision is set in between scenes of chaos and confusion. As one commentator notes:

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

¹ Reginald Heber, John Dykes, *Holy Holy Holy*.

² R.C. Sproule, *The Holiness of God*, (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2010), 46-47.

heaven shows that these appearances are deceptive. **God is holy**. The word primarily means ‘separate’, and this separateness includes complete purity. Our God is good.³

Do you feel the chaos swirling all around you? Does it feel like the world has been turned upside down? Does it feel like things are entirely out of control? Then listen closely.

In the midst of chaos and confusion, God spoke to His servant John and gave Him a comforting vision. Look with me now to Revelation, chapter 4. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.³ And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God,⁶ and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind:⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight.⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

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

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever,¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

¹¹ “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.” (Revelation 4:1-11 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

³ Leon Morris, *Revelation (TNTC)*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 92.

On Christmas Sunday, we are going to return to the manger where the God of the universe entered into our humanity. Here, in Revelation 4, we are considering a scene in which a man – the Apostle John – is invited up into God’s heavenly throne room. Before we marvel at God with us, let’s marvel at this story of us with God.

Our text this morning describes a vision. Therefore, our task is not simply to hear John’s message but to attempt to see in our mind’s eye what John saw. So, let’s survey this heavenly scene.

Surveying the Heavenly Scene

The first thing we notice as we survey this scene is that everywhere John looks, he sees:

1. Indescribable glory

As John attempts to describe the scene before him he speaks of rainbows and precious stones because he has no other words to describe the glory that he sees! Look again at verse 3 as he describes God seated on His throne:

And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. (Revelation 4:3 ESV)

Are we to make of this verse that God the Father is made up of precious gemstones? Is our God contrived of jasper and cornelian? Obviously not! John looks at the throne and sees a glimmering, sparkling radiance, and the closest thing he can think of is the gems that you could only find in a palace. As John Calvin notes:

For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness.⁴

That’s what we have in this text. God is revealing indescribable heavenly realities to John – and by extension to us – in categories that we can understand. The problem, of course, is that God

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 66.

exceeds every possible category available to us. He is – by definition – OTHER! And so, every time a prophet receives a heavenly vision, their words make it clear that what they have witnessed is beyond description. Take the prophet Ezekiel, for example. Listen to the way that he attempts to describe his vision of God:

And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance.²⁷ And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. (Ezekiel 1:26-27 ESV)

Do you hear that? He is clearly mindful of the fact that his descriptions are woefully lacking. “It was like, kind of, in the appearance of, perhaps.” There simply weren’t any words glorious enough to draw from!

In the preaching workshop, we were discussing just how impossible a task these prophets faced. Imagine trying to describe something that exists so far beyond your understanding. Imagine taking a man who lives in a secluded tribe in the Amazon Rainforest and dropping him into Disney Land. How would he describe that scene?

“I saw what appeared to be giant, metal dragons. They seemed to have people in their bellies... But the people were smiling! And the people were wearing half of a mouse’s head as a hat. And there was a large, talking dog but the children were not afraid of him.”⁵

To be honest, that seems to be what is happening here. John is looking around at a room full of angelic beings encircled around a giant throne upon which the Holy, Holy, Holy God is seated, and he simply doesn’t have the words to accurately describe it.

That’s a helpful insight for us this morning. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we are not going to “nail down” the holiness of God today. We will spend a lifetime meditating on, trembling before and seeking to live in response to God’s holiness, but simply put: The “Godness” of God,

⁵ This analogy courtesy of Paul Carter ☺

will forever be beyond our understanding. He is marked by an indescribable glory. That's the first thing we see here.

The second thing that we see as we survey this scene is:

2. Absolute sovereignty

The word "throne" appears seventeen times in chapters 4 and 5. That is because this vision serves a specific purpose in the book of Revelation. As commentator William Hendrikson notes:

The purpose of this vision is to show us, in beautiful symbolism, that all things are governed by the Lord on the throne.⁶

That's what this vision is about, and that's why it is placed where it is placed.

In the opening chapters of Revelation, we learn that the church is in relative disarray. In the chapters immediately following our text today, God is going to describe to John the events that will take place until Christ returns. There will be wars and famines. There will be spiritual opposition and political upheaval. There will be pandemics and earthquakes and it will often feel like the world is spiraling out of control!

However, in between the audit of the struggling church and the description of the trials to come, God provides us with a glimpse into the scene that dictates every other scene. In chapters 4 and 5, we are brought into the throne room of God, and there is not one ounce of panic. The cherubim are covered in eyes which is to say that they see it all! They see the struggling church, the rising beast and the coming trials. And yet, they continue to sing their songs of praise without even a hint of anxiety. Look again at verse 6:

and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. (Revelation 4:5-6 ESV)

If we're going to understand this detail, we need to remember what the sea represented to first century listeners. Fishermen took their lives into their hands every time they ventured out to sea.

⁶ William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors – An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1967), 95.

They were at the mercy of the crashing waves and the unpredictable winds. Throughout the Bible, the sea is representative of danger and chaos. In fact, in Revelation 13, the beast rises up out of the sea to harass the people of God.

But in the heavenly throne room, God sits before a sea of *glass*. There is no chaos. There is no danger. There is only the Triune God reigning with absolute authority, waiting patiently for the day when He will finally cast down His foes and establish His eternal reign over the new heavens and the new earth. One commentator notes here:

God has not retired from His throne. He initiated history and is still very much in charge of it, in spite of what appearances sometimes suggest.⁷

That is a necessary word for us today, isn't it? We spend a lot of time watching the news and scrolling through our social media. Everywhere we look, we're given another reason to be afraid – another reason to wonder whether God really is in control.

But the God who made you – the God who loves you – the God who works all things according to the good of those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose – IS SEATED ON HIS THRONE BEFORE A SEA OF GLASS! He is still large and in charge, even when your circumstances shout at you that He is not. God has invited us into His heavenly throne room so that we would see and take comfort in His absolute sovereignty.

Finally, as we survey this heavenly scene, we discover:

3. Whole-hearted submission

Day and night, the cherubim never cease to proclaim:

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8b ESV)

The 24 elders cast down their golden crowns upon the glassy sea. As Leon Morris explains:

⁷ G.K. Beale, David Campbell, *Revelation – A Shorter Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 107.

The throwing down of their crowns expresses the truth that he alone reigns. All other sovereignty must yield to his.⁸

By throwing down their crowns and falling down on their knees, these angelic elders proclaim with their actions the same message that they proclaim with their mouths. We hear that song of praise in verse 11. They sing:

¹¹ “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.” (Revelation 4:11 ESV)

Every angelic being in the throne room of God responds with whole-hearted submission to the God who is holy, holy, holy. How could they not? They have SEEN God!

Listen: When we catch a glimpse of God, we throw all of our claims to authority and autonomy down at His feet and we proclaim “These crowns are yours! This life is yours! Only you are worthy of it! Lead me!”

That, by the way, is why we pray: “Hallowed be your name” in the Lord’s prayer. We are saying, “God, be seen and acknowledged and HONOURED as holy in my life and in this world.”

If you have seen God – if you have encountered Him in any real way – then you will throw down your crown. You will surrender your sin, and you will happily submit to His rule. Because seeing Him changes everything. R.C. Sproule says here:

God appears, people quake in terror, God forgives and heals, God sends. **From brokenness to mission is the human pattern.**⁹

Life transformation ONLY comes through an encounter with the living God. I’m going to teach my kids to obey – absolutely – but as a Christian father, my desire for them is so much more than a good moral lifestyle. The training of well-behaved citizens is not my ambition. I want them to

⁸ Leon Morris, *Revelation (TNTC)*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 93.

⁹ R.C. Sproule, *The Holiness of God*, (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2010), 40.

know God! I want them to see Him and to delight in Him and to willingly surrender to Him!
Because that is the only place where real, lasting change happens.

If you are living in sin, and you have been for a long time, I would go so far as to say this: I don't believe that you have truly encountered God.

I don't.

Because if you have even the faintest idea of how glorious He is, that little toy crown of sin that you've been holding onto would have long been cast down at His feet.

BEHOLD OUR GOD, seated on his throne! Come let us adore Him! Amen? Amen.

With the time that we have remaining, I want to zoom in and consider the song that the angels sing. Because here's my suspicion: I think we use the word "holy" in this place all the time, and we sing about and celebrate God's "holiness" in our songs, but I suspect that most of us have spent very little time reflecting on why God's holiness matters.

The angels around the throne sing an unending song of praise and they choose to endlessly celebrate THIS attribute of God:

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!" (Revelation 4:8b ESV)

Why is it that the cherubim sing THIS song? They could worship God for any of His attributes. They could proclaim before the throne: "Love, love, love" or "Mercy, mercy, mercy" or "Strong, strong, strong" but instead, the everlasting song of praise celebrates God's holiness. Why is that? Is that the attribute that you would celebrate if you had the choice?

To that end, we are going to spend our remaining time this morning meditating on the holiness of God.

Meditating on the Holiness of God

First of all, because God is holy:

1. You can trust Him

At the beginning of this sermon, I gave a brief definition of holiness. To say that God is holy is to say that he is set apart – He is OTHER! It is to say that he is perfectly pure and unblemished by sin. The puritan Stephen Charnock put it this way:

The holiness of God *negatively* is a perfect and unpolluted freedom from all evil.¹⁰

To worship God for His holiness is to delight in the fact that there is not even a hint of evil or sin in any part of Him. God will NEVER do wrong.

To worship God for His holiness is also to delight in the fact that God will never OVERLOOK wrong.

I don't know about you, but I have been overwhelmed by the depravity of man over this past year. I remember one Sunday night when our prayer group was praying over Zoom and, as I was praying, I just lost it. Over the course of one week, I felt as if I had seen so much hatred, racism and division. As I was praying, it hit me that God sees it ALL. Can you even imagine that?

He sees every child that is stolen from their home. He sees every person buried under systems of oppression. He sees every murder, every theft, every lie, every injustice. He sees all of it.

Just the thought of that gave me a deeper love for Him. I am so thankful that our God is not a God who hides His face in His hands. He's not a God who is indifferent to our pain and who is merely minding His own affairs. No, He sees it all.

But seeing it all is not enough, right? Who could worship a God who sees it all but who chooses not to do anything? What good is omniscience if the One who possess it is indifferent?

¹⁰ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 452.

But the holiness of God guarantees that God will ACT! And, more than that, He will act at EXACTLY the right time. When it is all said and done and we survey the human story, no one will be able to accuse God of wrongdoing. His patience and His justice, His forbearance and His wrath will always and only be distributed in EXACTLY the right measure at EXACTLY the right time.

And in the final tally, not a single wrong will go unpunished. Because God is holy. At the core of who He is, He is the antithesis of evil. He has never looked the other way. He has never had the wool pulled over His eyes. He has never forgotten. He has never shirked His responsibility. He will put an end to the darkness with one fell swoop and there won't be even a hint of it in the new heaven and the new earth.

The God who sits on His throne before a sea of glass has GOT THIS! So, trust Him. "Fear not!" There is no command in the Bible that appears more frequently. When you understand that He is holy, holy, holy the news gets a little less frightening and the hurricane begins to feel like a drizzle and death loses its sting. Behold Him.

Second, because God is holy:

2. You can delight in Him

Poor Matt Szkarlat once had the unenviable task of being my roommate in Bible College. Our friendship needed a year to heal after that experience because the more he got to know me, the more he saw how flawed and unimpressive I am.

But, because God is holy, the deeper you look into Him – the more you come to know and experience Him – the more delightful He will become to you! There is nothing unlovely in Him at all.

I quoted the puritan Stephen Charnock earlier. He wrote a massive work entitled *The Existence and Attributes of God* and in his book, he argues that if God were not holy, we could not celebrate any of His other attributes. He writes:

If every attribute of the Deity were a distinct member, purity would be the form, the soul, the spirit to animate them. Without it, his patience would be an indulgence to sin, his mercy a fondness, his wrath a madness, his power a tyranny, his wisdom an unworthy subtilty.¹¹

Do you see what he is arguing here? By way of contrast, our good deeds are ALWAYS tainted in one shape or form by sin. We celebrate courage and conviction in a man, but deep down that man knows that some of his courage and conviction is actually rooted in pride. The same man who is celebrated in the public theatre is resented at home by his wife who sees that his conviction is often just an excuse for self-righteousness and arrogance. In the same way, the woman who is celebrated for her beauty struggles with vanity and self-obsession. The person who is celebrated as humble often proves to be too cowardly to do the things that need to be done. The best attribute that you have also has a dark side. Isn't it true?

That is true of us. But it is not so with God. Each and every one of His attributes is perfectly PURE. His justice is a pure justice. His mercy is a pure mercy. All of who He is is perfectly, undilutedly HOLY.

This is the reason why the Cherubim forever worship God for His holiness. It is the holiness of God that ensures that everything that God does is perfectly good. And this holiness – this absolute perfection – is fundamental to who God is. As Charnock goes on to say:

He is as necessarily holy as he is necessarily God; as necessarily without sin as without change. As he was God from eternity, so he was holy from eternity.¹²

Think of it this way: Have you ever become disillusioned by someone that you used to deeply respect? This is a natural step in the relationship between parents and children, isn't it? Suzy grows up thinking that daddy is superman, but one day she grows up and she realizes that dad actually has a pretty short temper, and he is a little self-absorbed and he can be a bit of a gossip. It's hard for us when we realize that superman is not as super as we thought.

¹¹ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 451.

¹² Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 452.

But, because God is holy, you will NEVER uncover a flaw in His character. You will never find a spot or trace of sin in His actions. Because God is holy, you can know that He will only, always and forever be good, and you can delight in Him.

Obviously, we could list off 100 reasons but, sticking with our advent theme, I want to end with one last meditation. Because God is holy:

3. We marvel at the manger

2,000 years ago, the Son of God – the second person of the Godhead – left the heavenly throne room where he was surrounded by the ceaseless praise of angels. He was birthed into a stable where ox and ass lay feeding. God, who is the antithesis of sin, washed the feet of sinners and dined at their tables. The Son of God who is forever and only perfect in holiness and spotless in purity took upon himself the sin of his people so that the righteous requirements of God’s holy justice could be satisfied on our behalf. While he bore the sin of the world, crowds mocked him and spat upon him, but he never retaliated because even in the bearing of our sin he acted with perfect, spotless holiness.

And then he died. The second person of the Trinity bore our sin in his flesh and then, according to his human nature, he died.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23 ESV)

This morning, as you behold the Holy, Holy, Holy God, I want you to know that every sin will be accounted for. Nothing goes unseen. You will stand before the throne and behold the God whose very nature is to crush and destroy sin and evil. But, wonder of wonders, He has provided you with a way of escape!

That way of escape is Jesus Christ. Let go of your sin today. Let him bear it for you once for all on the cross of Calvary. Cast down your golden crowns and submit to Him as your Savior and Lord. Repent. Believe.

And then look again with wonder and amazement at the manger. See the holy God who sits enthroned before a sea of glass, laying in swaddling clothes surrounded by straw and hay. The holy one, entering into an unholy world to save sinners and rebels from the wrath they deserve.

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8b ESV)

This is our God! And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.