

Why Is There Singing In Heaven

Series: Theology in Pictures

by Steve Zeisler

One of my favorite episodes in American literature is the story of Tom Sawyer and the whitewashing of his Aunt Polly's fence. Tom not only manipulated his friends into doing a difficult job for him, but into paying him for the privilege as well. He succeeded in doing this by insinuating that he alone was worthy of the difficult assignment of fence-painting.

In that account, Tom is represented as understanding the deepest hunger of the soul, and knowing how to turn it to his advantage. Human beings long for acceptance more than anything else. Everyone in this room, I am sure, can think of times when he has done something foolish, or expensive, or even shameful, just to be approved by others, to be included in the circle of the worthy. We hunger for human approval because deep down we hunger for the approval of our Creator. We were made by God for himself, therefore we will always require someone outside ourselves to find value in us.

What does it mean to be approved, to belong, to be worthwhile, in the eyes of our Creator? Turn to the Book of Revelation, chapter 4. If you are like most Christians, Revelation, at best, is a not very understandable curiosity to you. But I think that's because we really do not let the book speak for itself. After returning from Nigeria recently, and trying to share with others what happened on our trip, it occurred to me that there are two ways to communicate something like that, and they are both important and necessary. The first is a conceptual analysis- to say clearly what happened and why it happened, to talk about the lessons learned and the issues faced, to give summaries and insight into the nature of things. But photographic slides do a great job too. Being able to see faces and places, conditions under which people live, etc., has a very significant communication value.

Now God, the master communicator, has employed both of these methods of communication in the Scripture. In Romans and Galatians, for instance, Paul presents theology in an analytical form, but in Revelation John gives us "slides," visions, pictures that communicate many of the same messages. This book would make a lot more sense if we would not insist on an analytical approach. To demand that every symbol be clearly and precisely explained and that every time reference be pinned down to the minute, ruins, or at least takes away, some of the value of the book. I encourage you to open the eyes of your mind and see these things as we read them, look at them clearly, and we will see what we can learn from this Book of Revelation. Chapter 4:

After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, [the voice of Jesus like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things." Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sadius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. And around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty -- four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads. And from the throne proceed flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; and before the throne there was, as it were, a sea of glass like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. And the first creature was like a iron, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say,

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Is The Lord God, The Almighty, who was and who is and who Is to come."

And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

"Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created."

John is called by Christ to come to the throne-- room of heaven, where he sees three kinds of beings. First, God the Father is described, ruling his universe in unquestioned sovereignty Reading this, I am left with an impression of unassailable purity and power -- especially when you contrast this scene with what Jesus said about the church in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 3, verse 17, for instance, there is a description of the mixture of good and bad, faith and failure, that makes up the church,

. . . you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,

Everything about the description of God the Father strikes me as reflecting either his beauty or his power. He is described in terms of dazzling jewels-- the jasper (the diamond, perhaps), the sardius, an emerald rainbow surrounds him, in front of him a flawless crystal sea. The beauty of the light of the Holy Spirit is represented in seven lamps that surround the throne. John also hears the crashing of thunder exploding from the throne, reminding him of the power of God.

He also sees four living creatures. I am almost certain that what John saw was what Ezekiel calls "cherubim." (We have already had several Old Testament references_ the rainbow, which recalls the great flood, the thunder and lightning, which recall the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, etc.) In fact, chapter 1 of Ezekiel describes a very similar set of details to what we see in chapter 4 of Revelation. Ezekiel saw a giant chariot: an expanse of crystal holding up a throne on which God was seated. Underneath were giant gyroscopic wheels that rolled the platform down to the plain in front of Ezekiel. He also saw four creatures with the same kind of faces that John saw here, I am sure that John would have recalled that vision of Ezekiel. In Genesis the cherubim are said to be the ones who protect the tree of life so that sinful man cannot live forever. They are actually given a flashing sword to defend the tree and keep man away. (I have heard doting parents describe their chubby little children as cherubs, but cherubs are anything but fat babies with wings and tiny bows and arrows. They are hulking, scary, powerful. military servants of God.)

The third kind of beings that John saw were twenty-- four elders. These individuals are not described clearly anywhere else in scripture. John's description of them is very instructive, however, because there is something reminiscent about God the Father in it. The elders are on thrones, as is God, and they are beautiful in appearance as he is. It strikes me that what John is seeing, possibly, is a kind of representation of humanity as it ought to be-- in the image of God, faithfully obeying and reflecting his glory.

The clearest, most arresting thing about chapter 4, however, is not the description of what John sees, but of the things he hears these beings say. Verse 8:

And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say,

**"Holy, Holy, Holy, is The Lord God,
The Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come. "**

These creatures stress first, God's utter removal from anything corrupt or evil. That is what holiness is. Second, they stress his

unchangeability, his immutability. He was and is and is to come. He is always the same. He is never restricted; he is never thwarted; he is never bruised or beaten.

Then the elders answer this refrain:

"Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created."

What the elders emphasize, I think, is the "creatorhood" of God, the fact that he is the maker of everything. In fact, every element of God's creation, except one, reflect his glory. Everything else God ever made lives in a kind of dependent gratitude to him, thanking him and glorifying him that he is the maker, the creator. Only one element of his creation does not thank him and that, I think, is the impression that John can e away with after seeing this vision.

Let me ask you again: Can you picture these things in your mind? Every element in this scene is either beautiful or powerful, or both. It is dazzling, frightening, loud, immense, self-- contained, unchanging and perfect. The refrain, "Holy, Holy, Holy," reverberates unceasingly, to be answered by the words of the elders, "glory and honor and power." I suggested at the beginning that a sense of belonging before God is the desperate need of every human being, but I do not think there is a clearer representation of failure to belong than what we have in this description. You and I do not belong there. We are the one element of God's creation that does not thank him, that does not clearly reflect his beauty, his strength, his perfection. Pettiness, lust, whining, frailty, and arrogance have no place whatever in this scene. We do not belong, and I think John began to sense that.

Chapter 5:

And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?" And no one in heaven, or on the earth, or under the earth, was able to open the book, or to look into it. And I began to weep greatly, because no one was found worthy to open the book, or to look into it;

"Weep greatly" is probably not a strong enough translation; "bitter mourning" might be closer. John felt a terrible anguish when he realized that the book, the scroll in the hand of God the Father, could never be opened. "Who is worthy?" No one answers.

In chapter 6 we find the condition and the destiny of humanity wrapped up in that scroll. We find what we are like and where we are headed contained in it, so in a sense it is like a "deed" for earth. The sinful condition of man in rebellion against God is inside that scroll, and it does not belong in heaven, it has no place in the presence of God. John sensed that and he began to weep and cry.

But, then we have the great turning point, the great, dramatic statement of the elder to John, in verse 5:

and one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals." And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.

The first thing the elder says to John is to stop weeping because there is an answer to this problem. A Lion will appear who will solve it, John is told. A lion is something we might expect to see in this scene filled with other dramatic animals and giant, strong, impressive beings; a lion would fit in. But when John turns to look for a lion, he sees instead a lamb, probably the least impressive, frailest, the least dramatic animal imaginable, quite unlike anything else in the scene. And it is a Lamb, "standing, as if slain." The New English Bible translates verse 6 this way:

Now I saw standing in the very middle of the throne inside the circle of living creatures

and the circle of elders, a Lamb with the marks of slaughter on him.

For the first time in heaven there is something neither beautiful or powerful. Yet it is precisely because of that Lamb that sinful human beings like us are allowed in; we have a place there. The scroll, the deed, can be opened before God because of the Lamb with the marks of slaughter on him.

What is said following the Lamb's taking of the scroll adds to the depth of what is happening here:

And He came, and He took it out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying,

"Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth. "

And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying,

"To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever."

**And the four living creatures kept saying "Amen."
And the elders fell down and worshiped.**

The first statements made in chapter 4 were spoken; these in chapter 5 are sung. Someone can say things to you, but there is a joy and wonder added if the same information is communicated in song. There is something more joyful about the response that is made when the Lamb is able to take the "deed" of earth and give it a place in heaven, to take sinful humanity and make room for us in the presence of God. The worship is fuller. There is incense, there are harps, there is an extended statement of who God is and what he has done. In the first statement of praise in chapter 4, God as Creator is lauded; in chapter 5 we see God as Redeemer being praised-- and we can be included in that song. We are his rebel creation, but we can be redeemed and sing the song of chapter 5,

"For Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation."

The horizons are thrown back when we see chapter 5. There are 28 speakers honoring God in chapter 4, now there are thousands upon thousands, myriads upon myriads. The choir is beyond imagining. All of creation, it says, "every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them," begin to add to the song. A wonderful sense of joy, freedom and gladness pervades the songs in chapter 5.

Let me summarize this. John was called into heaven by the voice of Christ. (Even this suggests that John would not get to see heaven had he not been invited by the Lord.) He sees only perfection, with no place for sinful men. Realizing the depth of the problem, he mourns because, alone of God's creation, people like us have no place there. Then he was allowed to see the one Being who belonged there, who yet, in his appearance, was out of place. The Lord Jesus who is scarred and bloody, even in heaven, is strong enough to take the scroll from the hand of God and say, "This has a place here." He opens the scroll and allows his rebel

creation to come forth into the throne-- room of heaven. As the result, there is singing, joy and delight. John's tears give way to the song of the angels. Now if the angels sing and all the beasts in and under the sea and on the earth and all of creation delight because of the redemptive work of Christ, how much more ought we, for whom this work was done?

I would like to suggest two things by way of application concerning this scene. First, just like analytical accounts, like theological works, "slides" also have a way of fading from memory. You may have read other books in the Bible, you may have heard them preached and you may have understood what God has done for you in Christ, but three days later you can scarcely find them in the dim reaches of your memory. That very same process will occur with theology represented to us in vision form. The prince of this world has any number of fences you can paint. He has offers to make you that say, "You too are good enough to be valued on the basis of the money you make. You too can rise to the position of senior partner, head of the firm, president of the company, owner of great stretches of property, and as a result find a sense of value, acceptance and approval based on these things. I'll let you paint my fence. You can do it in the church." You can be involved in great scads of activity, and everybody will be impressed; you can be approved of for those things. There are new lines of cosmetics out that may do the job for you. You may be raising the 1990 Heisman Trophy winner in your home right now, and if you work hard enough at it you can derive a sense of value from that. There are any number of "liberations" you can get involved in so that the world and you yourself can finally say, "You're approved."

We need to say no to offers to whitewash fences. We need to say, "I will not base my worth on anything I can do or have done or any influence I have." Jesus said once, "The one who is forgiven little loves little." Working hard at establishing our own forgiveness makes us love Christ less. Every time we use our activities to build a pillar underneath us. to think of ourselves, "Well, my sin, my failure, can be overcome by an extended effort this time," every time we think we cancel the effects of sin by something we do, then we will not appeal to the Lord to forgive us that sin and we will love him less. "The one who is forgiven little loves little." When we refuse any other basis for approval and insist that we need to mourn desperately or else be valued on the merits of Christ-- those are our only two options- then we can join the song of the elders and the angels and the myriads of myriads.

The second point of application is described in Hebrews 2:16-18,

For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people [or payment for the sins of the people]. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

The Lion from the tribe of Judah is the unimpressive Lamb with the marks of slaughter on him. Though Jesus will be worshiped by every individual, though everything in creation will worship him, trust him, obey him and honor him, he still will bear those marks. When he appeared to the disciples after his resurrection, he said to Thomas, "Put your finger into the nail holes in my hands." Forever there will be about Jesus a diminishment, in effect, of his beauty; he will always carry about with him the marks of what our sin has done to him. But because of that he will always be the One to whom sinners can appeal. He will never outgrow his interest in, his commitment to, his value for sinners. The desperate, confused, beaten and hurting people who have hurt others, who have never been able to control themselves, who have laid the environment to waste, the kind of people who ought to feel terrified by everything else in heaven are the ones who will feel absolutely at home with him.

He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make payment for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

If we are hurting now, he is the One to go to. He understands the temptation; he is the merciful and faithful high priest who forgives and heals and restores. You do not need to be "healthy enough" to come to Jesus,

because he is bloody and wounded himself. Let us thank him for what it means to be acceptable before God because of the presence of the Lamb of God.

Father, we thank you for the slides, for the visual representation of being able to see how desperate we are apart from the work of Christ, and how honored we are as a result of it. Lord, keep us from letting anything Satan says rob us of this, and keep us remembering that sinners like us have an advocate in Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.

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