

Why We: Worship
Delivered May 5, 2013

As a kid who grew up in the church during the 80's and 90's I can tell you that we spent a lot of time talking about the book of Revelation. This was the height of the movement that culminated with infamous books like, "88 Reasons Jesus is Coming in 1988" and its sequel (don't laugh) "Rapture Report 1989". We talked about Revelation a lot, but mostly as speculation about what was going to happen in the future.

The focus was things like the identity of the Antichrist (Mikhail Gorbachev), the mark of the beast, and whether or not we should use credit cards because that was part of the world system the Antichrist would use to track us. When I turned 13 I was allowed to begin youth group, and one of my first experiences in youth group was watching a series of movies that began with "A Thief in the Night".

Apart from the terribly cheesy 1970's effects, costumes and dialogue, I'm convinced that these movies were made for the express purpose of scaring the living daylights out of every single kid in the youth group. I spent years after those movies scared that I was going to miss out on the rapture of the church and be left behind to suffer through the great tribulation.

The unfortunate consequence of this obsession with Revelation was that I never really looked at Revelation like a part of the Bible that I needed to pay attention to now. I read it like a weird kind of fairy tale that was all about the end of the world. It seemed like the only options I was given for reading the book were to either ignore it, or to approach it with elaborate schemes about the future. It felt like a book that was totally disconnected from the present life, unless it was to figure out how current events fit into the "road map" that Revelation gave us for the future.

But when we disconnect this book from its context in history and from our own current context, the book loses some of its power and significance. When it's all about the future and isn't allowed to speak to us in our present circumstances it is not very helpful for us at all. So as we get into the "why" question for this week, it's really important that we understand that this was a letter written to churches in a particular moment in their history that was marked by incredible persecution and opposition to the message of Jesus and to the church, and so when they gathered together to worship, they were quite literally taking their lives into their hands for that privilege.

For the most part we can't really relate to that level of dedication and commitment to the gathering of God's people. We gather freely every week on Sunday to proclaim Jesus as Lord, and even though our message runs counter to the prevailing culture we still get to gather without fear of being interrupted and arrested or imprisoned for our faith. But when these churches declare Jesus is Lord they directly contradict the command of the Roman Empire to proclaim Caesar as Lord.

Their gatherings were a counter cultural movement within the Roman Empire. And while we don't have the same threats hanging over our heads, we still gather together to worship and declare Jesus is Lord. We still face opposition to that message and need the same reminders that they needed: our allegiance is to him alone.

The first three chapters of Revelation consist of short letters written to seven churches scattered throughout the region around Rome. They are written because John receives a revelation of Jesus who asks him to write to the churches on his behalf. They are full of both encouragement and correction – encouragement for what they have done well, but correction for areas where they are in danger of losing sight of Jesus as Lord.

Revelation 4-5 opens up on a heavenly scene, the stage being set at the outset of chapter 4 when John writes that he saw heaven opened through a door and he was invited to come up to see what was happening at the same moment of their struggle on earth. His vision is very colorful, and the language would rightly be called “apocalyptic”, as his descriptions of the events are highly symbolic. It’s reminiscent of some of the Old Testament prophets like Daniel and Ezekiel who also had similar visions.

The main emphasis, however, is on the idea that while these churches are gathering under the cloud of persecution there is a heavenly worship gathering taking place in heaven where all of God’s creatures worship and exalt God for his surpassing greatness. It is reminiscent of those Old Testament scenes, but chapter 5:1-5 begins to paint the scene with emphasis on the role of Jesus in the scene. Verse 5 refers to him as the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Root of David – both of which are Old Testament references that make clear that Jesus is the central figure in the history of redemption.

In verses 6-10 we see the Lamb who looks as if he has been slain stands front and center to the throne and the scene unfolds even further. The creatures around him fall down in reverence and worship to him, and their act of worship in this setting includes both prayer and singing. Music isn’t the only aspect of worship that matters; the critical component is the adoration of Jesus. Even more important than their singing is the content of their song. Jesus is worthy of the praise and adoration because he died and purchased for God people from every culture, language and nation on the earth to participate in his kingdom, serving God and reigning with him forever.

When the church gathers to worship (then and now) we are a representative sample of this heavenly gathering before the throne. The entire church, encompassing every kind of person regardless of the things that might separate us, is wrapped up in worship to the Lamb who redeemed all of us for his purpose. The church gathered to worship is also the church conscious of its mission, because we are still tasked with making disciples of all those nations and cultures beginning with our own. It is the church’s mission to invite more people into that circle of worship and to do so by breaking down the barriers that divide so we can clearly focus on Jesus.

From there the circle widens out even further in verses 11-12 as the voices of many angels are added to the mix of praises surrounding the throne. They begin to declare the worth of the one who has all power, wealth, wisdom and more. He is our everything, the angels declare, and so he is worth all that we, his creation, could possibly give.

And then the circle widens further as the passage moves towards its peak. In verses 13-14 John tells us that while the church was at worship under fire on earth, the totality of creation everywhere added their voices to the worship of Jesus and the Father – the kind of worship that will resound forever. When we gather to worship now, we anticipate a future day when the entire creation will acknowledge what we say is true right now – that

Jesus is Lord and Savior. We are willing participants in that scene even now because by grace through faith we choose to honor the Lamb as both Savior and God.

When we sing, pray, and hear God's word spoken to us, we are not just singing along with some good music, we are engaged with the worship of Jesus that will last forever. Nothing could possibly be more important than that. Nothing could be more significant than the gathering of God's people to declare that this is, and will always be, true. We gather because it is a privilege and a joy to worship the King who died to save us.

When we join with that heavenly gathering to worship, the apostle Paul gives us a word of insight into what happens in those moments. In Colossians 3 he writes that when we gather with Jesus at the center of our community, the message of Christ dwells among us richly with all kinds of wisdom. We sing our songs and hymns of praise to Jesus in worship for who he is, and as we do we teach each other even more about the one who has redeemed every one of us from the power of sin and death into a new life.

In that sense, our worship gathering here is never primarily about us, but about creating the environment where the message of Jesus' death and resurrection can stand front and center as Jesus is exalted. When that happens each of us is being invited to follow Jesus more deeply, to worship him more fully, and the more we get to know who he is, the more we will desire to worship him and make his name famous in the earth. We want to move as close to the scene in Revelation 4-5 as is possible here and now.

So from a practical perspective here at New Life that means we gather each week on Sunday to proclaim that Jesus is alive. We say in our songs, prayers, and teaching that Jesus is alive; that he is Lord and King over us and our community. When we gather here, we believe we have gathered around Jesus and his presence with us makes this such a transformational experience.

We try to make beautiful music on Sunday that would inspire you and uplift you, but we do that so you will be pointed towards Jesus who is the one our songs exalt. When we pray on Sunday, we pray for your hearts to be moved to be more like Jesus who is your source of strength, wisdom, power, and life. When we preach on Sunday it is so that you will understand Jesus a little bit more, and be challenged to let his word shape your character more. To say it simply – you are not the audience for anything that we do here, you are a participant with us. When we together sing, pray, and hear the word this place changes its character; we look with John through that open door into heaven and we see Jesus highly exalted there. And every time we do that, I'm convinced that a little bit of heaven breaks in here among us as we worship along with the host of heaven.

As we close this morning I'm going to ask you to do something very practical. We typically close our service with a final song, and today will be no different. But today I want you to close your eyes for a moment and picture the scene John described in Revelation 4 and 5. As we sing this morning about Jesus who is worthy of all our praise and adoration, I want you to consciously press your face up against that open door of heaven, and as heaven breaks into earth I want us to blow the doors off of this place. I don't usually say it like that, but today I just want you to let it rip. I want you to sing like your lungs are filled with the breath of heaven. I want the band to play like we are standing in front of Jesus himself, and I just want us to have a moment today to experience one brief glimpse of what it will be like when we see him face to face.