

The Lamb and the Beast, Part 1: Deep Worship
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Scripture: Revelation 4:1-11; Psalm 148

1. Deep Worship

This series is essentially a continuance of the Seven Letters to Seven Churches series – at least insofar as it picks up where the letters leave off in Revelation 3. Few people realize this, but while the Book of Revelation is 21 chapters long, the whole book is pretty much summed up in Chapters 4 through 7 – which is the scope of our present series. After Chapter 7, new information is given, but it is really just a circling back and exploring other dimensions of the original story. So, we'll be going through what might be called the "Executive Summary" of Revelation.

My friend and colleague, Rev. Bruce Van Blair, has a theory that Revelation continues so long after Chapter 7 because its author, John of Patmos, who is in a Roman jail for being a Christian, is simply bored. He has nothing better to do than continue to ponder and develop the original vision that provoked his writing.

I actually think Bruce may be onto something. Divine visions tend to be short and pack a wallop. It makes perfect sense to me that John would continue to circle around the vision, coming at it from different angles, considering different dimensions of it, and recording his thoughts the whole time. The experience that is responsible for me being a minister lasted around 15-20 minutes. Yet it took me over 30 years and writing four books in order to fully unpack the experience. (And you thought John of Patmos was long-winded!)

The Book of Revelation can seem really "way out" and weird, but what I really appreciate about what John of Patmos has done is that he didn't write a theological treatise about his experience, nor did he write a self-help book outlining the 10 different ways his experience can make your life better. Instead, John is trying to push human language to its very limits to help us *experience* something of what he experienced, rather than simply know something about it. He's telling a story that is not meant to be taken literally, but metaphorically, and not just metaphorically but *emotionally*. He wants us to feel the same thing he felt in that 15-20 minutes he experienced God so fully.

I doubt that John actually saw a great throne, a glassy sea, 24 elders wearing crowns, and strange animals with wings. In fact, I doubt he saw or heard anything. If his

experience is like that of many others who have had “road to Damascus” kinds of experiences, what he experienced was a mind-blowing set of feelings and thoughts that hit him like a bolt of lightning, whose intensity ramped up rapidly over the course of several minutes, then gradually subsided, leaving him gasping for breath. Then, he wrote what he did in an attempt to help you and me experience at least a small taste of what he experienced.

A couple of weeks ago, I invited you to think back to your first kiss. If you were to describe that experience in a literal sense, talking about how you pursed your lips, bent forward, and mashed them around a bit with your partner, would this really convey what was life-changing about this kiss? It would be far truer to the experience if you were to speak of fireworks exploding, the earth shaking beneath your feet, and falling head over heels down an abyss of love. Can you imagine people 2,000 years from now discussing this description as if you were being literal? You’d probably tell them, “You’re crazy if you think this all literally happened!” Just what do you think John would say to us for taking his experience literally?

In Chapter 4, what John is trying to convey is what an experience of God’s presence feels like when your heart is wide open to God. John calls what he felt “deep worship” (Rev. 4:2). If we notice a few things about the unusual scene he sets before us, we may experience a little of what “deep worship” felt like to John and perhaps feel a little of it ourselves.

The first thing I want us to notice is the unusual contrast between all the grand and glorious things going on – thunder and lightning, unusual animals flying around with six wings, and 24 elders casting their crowns before God’s throne – and the fact that the throne is in the middle of a glassy sea.

Have you ever stood next to a pond or lake whose surface was like glass? How did you feel? There’s nothing like a motionless pond or lake water to provoke a sense of peace within us. That’s because what we feel when we see a glassy smooth pond or lake is exactly the way we feel when our soul is at deep peace – when something that is normally in motion and full of waves within us settles down and becomes utterly still.

John wants you to take this feeling of deep peace and multiply it by a thousand. The throne is surrounded not by a glassy pond or lake, but by an entire ocean that is as smooth as glass.

Now, having grown up in Seattle and worked in the seafood industry in Alaska, I’ve spent a lot of time on the ocean over the years – twice spending six months aboard a ship. I’ve seen some very smooth seas but never have I seen the ocean become as still and smooth as glass. What John is trying to tell us is that the peace he felt in God’s

presence was so deep that it is as if an entire ocean went calm in front of him and before God's throne. He felt this kind of peace despite the fact that all this wild stuff is going on around the throne!

Curiously, in meditation, one of the most dependable ways of marking that you've connected with a higher spiritual plane is a sensation of something that was agitated within you suddenly experiencing peace, or something clenched within you suddenly opening up. John's vision isn't so far from our everyday experience as we think! It's just on a more profound level.

I find the presence of 24 elders surrounding God's throne intriguing, too. It signals a couple of important things about what an experience of God is like. First, even the most profound experiences of God tend to take place either in community with others, or they have profound *implications* for your life with others. As far as I can tell, there's no such thing as a "God experience" that is *only* about you and God. It may very well be personal and intimate, but it also influences our behavior in the outside world. Repeated "God experiences," no matter how private, eventually move us deeper into relationship and community with others. If they don't, then the experiences should be held suspect.

Second, the fact that there are exactly 24 elders is intriguing. Many theories have been set forth by biblical scholars as to why the number 24. Nearly everyone recognizes the fact that 24 is a doubling of the number 12, which is a number of completeness in the Bible – twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles, and so on. Perhaps then, the implication is that "deep worship" brings people into community in an especially deep way.

Other scholars propose that the doubling of 12 stands quite literally for the 12 tribes of Israel plus the 12 apostles. If so, one implication would be that "deep worship" brings together Judaism and Christianity, which originally had become increasingly estranged from each other over the course of the First Century.

Curiously, if the 12 apostles are part of the number, then one of the 12 would be Judas! The implication here might be that, in the end, even Judas is transformed and welcomed at the throne of God. If such a grand reconciliation could happen to Judas, imagine what could happen to Paul Manafort or El Chapo ... or us?

I find it interesting that most scholars assume that every one of the 24 Elders standing around God's throne is male. The gender is not specified. What provokes "deep worship" in me when I consider the 24 elders is when I consider that there are 12 males and twelve females standing before the throne. Twelve being the number of completeness, what the image implies is that, in the end, all of us are reconciled with God. Not a single one of us is absent. This image also may imply that deep worship

brings people together, to the point where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. We all become as one when we stand in the presence of the One.

As Jesus prays in John 17:20-21, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ..."

II. Inclusive Worship

One of the most interesting aspects of John's vision of "deep worship" in Chapter 4 is the presence of animals before the throne. These animals are by no means pets! They are immensely powerful creatures, covered with eyes all around, indicating they are all-seeing. They chant day and night, indicating they are always worshipping. And whenever they start the chant all over again, the 24 Elders throw down their crowns before God and fall prostrate.

If you wonder why one looks like a lion, and one looks like an ox, and one has a human-like face, and one looks like an eagle in flight, don't ask me. People speculate about this, but it doesn't get us very far. What I find moving about this scene is the fact that there are animals there at all. And that they are worshipping God perpetually. They're even *leading* worship for the 24 Elders!

Could it be that nature is actively involved in the worship of God?

Long ago, I found this idea absurd. I don't anymore. In fact, the older I get, the more convinced I am that Psalm 148 is right, the Prophet Isaiah is right, St. Patrick and his Celtic cohorts are right, St. Francis is right, the Qur'an is right, and the Book of Revelation is right: These and others from in and outside our tradition all claim that Nature actively and perpetually worships God. And consciously – though not with the same consciousness you and I have.

More and more, science is revealing aspects of Nature confirming there is a lot more to Nature than meets the eye. Some scientific discoveries downright suggest that even trees act a lot more like creatures, even creatures with conscious awareness, than like mindless plants that mechanically grow and respond to their environment.

One of the best books I've read in years (and I've read a lot of good books in the last few years) is one that Dan McCollister recommended to me called *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel and How They Communicate* by Peter Wohlleben. Wohlleben is a German naturalist who spent over 20 years managing a forest for the forestry commission in Germany. His knowledge of the science of trees is extraordinary. So are the scientific findings he conveys. For instance, did you know that:

- Trees in a forest are connected to one another underground through a complex system of roots and fungi that convey electro-chemical signals much like the human brain does only at the much slower rate of the of 1/3 inch per second instead of 400 feet per second.
- These signals are used to share all kinds of information with other trees. For instance they can signal that a particular tree is short on a certain type of nutrient, causing other trees to route that nutrient to the tree along the same network. They can also signal that a particular kind of predator that feeds on trees is in the area.
- So much communication goes on in this vast root-and-fungi network that scientists literally refer to it these days as the “wood-wide-web”!
- Trees communicate with one another not just through the “wood-wide-web” but through the air. For instance, if a giraffe is nibbling on an acacia tree on the African savannah, the acacia tree immediately increases the amount of tannins in its leaves, which make the leaves both bitter and toxic to the giraffe, and also releases something like a pheromone that drifts through the air and alerts other acacia trees in the vicinity to start generating more tannin when the “pheromone” drifts their way. The giraffes know this behavior so well that, once the leaves start tasting bitter, they walk 100 yards or more away before they start nibbling again at acacia trees.
- Trees can not only send electrochemical signals and smell pheromone-like substances emitted by other trees, but they can taste as well. If a certain type of bug is nibbling at the leaves of some trees, they can actually tell what kind of bug it is, and then release a different pheromone that actually attracts predators that prey on this specific bug! That’s some sense of taste!
- Trees also seem to have memory. The explanation of this function is more complicated, but the long-and-short of it is that they can store up experiences from previous years that influence how they will react to various weather patterns.
- Trees also seem to have personalities such that, if a particular tree is in trouble, the others around it are more likely to help it out through routing nutrients their way. Naturalists have even found certain trees that have long been cut down being kept alive by other trees by routing nutrients to the stump, even when there is no advantage to the surrounding trees for doing so. Why they do this to some trees and not others is a mystery, but as Wohlleben suggests, it may just be that some trees are so likeable that the others won’t let them go.

I could go on and on with these astonishing discoveries about trees, but I'll leave it to you to read the book. Suffice it to say that Peter Wohlleben, who is in every sense a rational man of science, sums up his scientific tour-de-force by suggesting that trees have conscious awareness and personality – not like you and I have, but they have it nonetheless.

If this is true, then it's not such a large leap to suggest that trees can also worship their Creator, just as the Psalms and the Prophet Isaiah claims.

What if all of Nature has some form of awareness and actively, and perpetually, worships God? My guess is that if we could stand in a forest and sense the trees, the birds, and other flora and fauna all praising our Creator, it would drop us to our knees faster than lightning.

And this is exactly what the 24 Elders do. They fall to the ground and throw their crowns before our Creator ... every time they hear the animals praising God in worship.

Wouldn't it be amazing to hear Nature's praise? And wouldn't it be wondrous to experience peace so deep that we experience our souls like one great, glassy sea? Wouldn't it be exalting to look around us and know – really know – that all people will eventually be reconciled with God and each other; that all of us will be exalted by God so highly that it is as if each one of us had a golden crown on our heads; and that all of us will be so fully humble by that time that, as one, we cast our crowns down before the majesty and mystery of God?

If you can even remotely sense any of this, you can thank God. And you can thank John of Patmos.