

**Title:** The Holiness of God

**Scripture Focus:** Revelation 4:1-11

**Key Idea:** John's glimpse into the throne room of God reveals the depths of God's holiness and challenges us to respond in deep worship.

**Lesson Goals:**

- To understand the history and symbolism in the text
- To grasp the holiness of God
- To live out the reality of God's holiness in tangible acts of worship

**Introduction**

The apostle John, having been banished to the island of Patmos for proclaiming the faith, wrote the book of Revelation to give hope, blessing and warning to the seven churches which were facing persecution. After introducing the seven churches, John goes on to describe the throne room of God, and the holiness of the King! These images draw the reader into a place of worship and peace, even in the midst of their current tribulations. The greatness of God trumps all human dangers.

**An Open Door to Heaven (Revelation 4:1-2a)**

In chapter 4, John's visionary journey makes a shift from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm. Once again, he heard a voice like a trumpet and once again he was in the Spirit (cf. Revelation 1:10). But here, John is invited to journey into the throne room of the Lord. These opening words from John are reminiscent of Jesus' baptism vision in Mark 1:10-11. Both have an open door to the heavens, both have a voice speaking, and both make reference to the Spirit. These similarities in no way equate John to Jesus but once again we are given a glimpse into the throne room where the holiness of God is revealed (see also, Isaiah 6 & Ezekiel 1).

**Holiness Enthroned (Revelation 4:2b-6a)**

Up until this point, the language of Revelation has been relatively normal and comprehensible. Here John makes a shift to more symbolic language that tries to express the unfathomable realities of the heavenly realm. This use of symbolism, signs, and similes is consistent of other apocalyptic (from Greek meaning to uncover or disclose) type writing of that era (cf. Daniel). We must not get lost in the language or try to equate images that would have been understandable to the 1<sup>st</sup> century reader with images that make sense to us today. Thus, we must endeavour to see and hear what the 1<sup>st</sup> century listener would have seen and heard. Also, we must recognize that just as John struggled to find earthly language to describe the unfathomable, we too may lack the knowledge and imagination to grasp some of these realities.

John's heavenly description begins with a throne and someone seated on it. The one seated on the throne is certainly God, but John refrains from using a name or even describing Him in creaturely (human) imagery. Instead, we are left with the undeniable reality that the one on the throne is the true King of Kings. In a time when these early Christians lived under the

oppression of a Roman king who claimed to be divine and possess power and dominion, John's image is a stark reminder that there was only one King who was truly sovereign.

It is interesting that the only two descriptors of the King are that of jasper and carnelian. The jasper most likely referred to a translucent gem resembling crystal and as Bruce Metzger suggests, this would be a poetic way of drawing attention to the holiness and glory of God (*Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1993, p. 48). The carnelian, on the other hand, was a deep and fiery red, like a ruby. This could be a reference to God's wrath or to the fire of purification. Regardless, it makes reference to the holiness of God. It is interesting to note that these two gems are the first and last of twelve gems in the breastplate worn by the high priest when he entered the Holy of Holies, and that these gems represented the twelve tribes of Israel (see Exodus 28:17-21).

The rainbow around the throne points back to God's covenant with Noah after the flood (Genesis 9:11ff.). This is a clear reminder that the King is not only mighty but also merciful. He is a God who cares for His creation and desires to establish and maintain relationship with humanity.

Theories concerning the identity of the twenty-four elders are vast and inconclusive. It is possible that these elders represent the twelve patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples of Christ. But their identity is not what is important, but rather their role. They are those who worship the King (cf. 1 Chronicles 24-25). They are symbolic of all believers.

The lightning and thunder coming from the throne, as well as the imagery of the sea of glass, are further reminders of God's power, majesty and holiness. The seven blazing lamps, we are told, represent the seven spirits of God. Seven is a divine and symbolic number in Jewish theology and plays an important role in the book of Revelation. Here, therefore, the seven serves to represent the sevenfold character of the one Holy Spirit, rather than representing seven separate spirits.

### **Holiness Proclaimed: Act 1 (Revelation 4:6b-8)**

The four living creatures described in verses 6-8 are similar to the those found in Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6. These angelic creatures are said to be covered with eyes, probably symbolizing the all-seeing and ever-watchful eye of God. The various faces are likely meant to represent other attributes of God. Metzger says that these four creatures represent the "noblest, strongest, wisest and swiftest in creation" (Ibid, p. 50). While the existence of such creatures may be possible, it is more likely that they function to provide yet another picture of God's sovereignty, majesty and holiness.

Like the twenty-four elders, these strange creatures are more important for what they do rather than how they look or who they are. These winged beasts are the choir directors in the heavenly realms. Day and night they lead the congregation in worship and their message is clear. Simply put, the one seated on the throne is the Almighty God who was holy, is holy and always will be holy.

This song highlights the otherness of God, His transcendence. He is not like the rulers of this world, nor is He like any other living creature. Rather, this God is set apart, pure and without fault. Therefore, He is worthy of being praised.

## **Holiness Proclaimed: Act 2 (Revelation 4:9-11)**

The song of the four living creatures moves the twenty-four elders to action. And their only appropriate response is to prostrate themselves before the King. This is the ultimate symbol of humility and worship. These elders sit on thrones dressed in white and donning golden crowns thus highlighting their own majestic prominence. Yet, they know their place and thus offer up their crowns to the one true King.

Their song underscores God as creator and sustainer of all things. The title "our Lord and God" was used by the Roman Emperor Domitian who ruled during the time of John's writing of Revelation. Domitian was so arrogant that he demanded people refer to him as "our lord and god" (Ibid, p. 16). Thus, the early reader of Revelation would have clearly seen the irony. While the emperor demanded reverence, God was the only one worthy of this title, and not because He conquered but because He created.

## **Conclusion**

John gives us a glimpse into the heavenly realm and reminds us that regardless of our current circumstances, God is still the King seated on the throne. The fact that He is creator and sustainer, that He is sovereign and majestic and that He is holy must lead us to offer our whole lives to Him in worship. The response of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders should be our response. We should be holy because the Lord our God is Holy (Leviticus 19:2).

## **Questions and Activities:**

### **1. Engage Interest**

#### Symbols, Signs and Similes

This exercise is designed to help the group understand the use of symbols, signs and similes in apocryphal writings such as Revelation.

Have the group describe their favourite place using only symbols, signs and similes. Have them avoid using literal descriptors. See if the group can guess the place they are describing.

### **2. Explore the Word**

#### Introduction (Revelation 4:1-2a)

- Is there any connection between the door in Revelation 3:20 and the door in Revelation 4:1? What is the significance?
- What does John mean when he says he was "in the Spirit"? (v. 2b)

#### Holiness Enthroned (Revelation 4:2b-6a)

- Who was the one seated on the throne? (v. 2b) Why doesn't John give His name?
- Why do you think John uses so few symbols in describing the one on the throne? (v. 3a)
- What do you think the white garments and gold crowns represent on the twenty-four elders? (v. 4)
- Besides the seven lamps and seven spirits, where else do you see the use of "seven" in Revelation? (v. 5, cf. seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven angles, seven plagues, and the seven bowls). What is the importance of the number seven?

- Holiness Proclaimed: Act 1 (Revelation 4:6b-8)
  - What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of these four living creatures? (v. 6b)
  - How do you see these four creatures representing God? (v. 7) What animals would you use to describe attributes of God?
  - Does the image of God as all-seeing and ever-watchful comfort or scare you? Why? (v. 8a)
  - What comes to mind when you hear the song of the four living creatures in v. 8b? What is important about this song?
- Holiness Proclaimed: Act 2 (Revelation 4:9-11)
  - The four living creatures are said to give glory, honour and thanks to God; how do we give God the same? (v. 9)
  - Why do the twenty-four elders fall to the ground and lay down their crowns? (v. 10)
  - What are some practical ways that we can fall face down and lay our crowns before God?
  - The elders proclaim that God is worthy because He is creator and sustainer of the universe. How does this reality move you? (v. 11).

### **3. Examine Life**

- Holy, Holy, Holy

Make a copy of the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" by Bishop Reginald Heber. Have the group read the four stanzas together (or they can sing it).

- Using this song and our passage, define what it means for God to be holy and what it means to participate in this holiness.

- Glory, Honour and Thanks

Revelation 4:9 says that the four living creatures give God glory, honour and thanks. Have the group write the words "Glory, Honor and Thanks" leaving several spaces between each word. Ask the group to think of at least three things they can do to bring God glory, three things they can do to bring God honour, and three things they can do to give God thanks. They must be concrete and practical. Ask the group to share their responses with the rest of the group.

### **4. Exercise Your Faith**

- Be Holy as God is Holy

Read Leviticus 19:2 to the group. Have them spend the last few minutes of class praying together (if a large group, break them up into smaller groups). Have them focus their prayers in two specific areas. 1) Praising God for His holiness and 2) asking God to help them live out holy lives that bring glory, honour and thanks to Him through their worship of Him.