

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

<b>Series:</b>	<b>Revelation</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>14</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Revelation 4:1-11</b>		
<b>Date:</b>	<b>November 15, 2020 (a.m.)</b>		

### STANDING IN AWE

One of my favorite hymns is Charles H. Gabriel's (1856-1932) *I Stand Amazed in The Presence*:

I stand amazed in the presence  
of Jesus the Nazarene,  
And wonder how He could love me,  
a sinner condemned, unclean.

How marvelous! How wonderful!  
And my song shall ever be.  
How marvelous! How wonderful!  
Is my Savior's love for me!

For me it was in the garden,  
He prayed: "Not my will, but Thine."  
He had no tears for His own griefs,  
but sweat-drops of blood for mine.

In pity angels beheld Him,  
and came from the world of light  
To strengthen Him in the sorrows  
He bore for my soul that night.

He took my sins and my sorrows,  
He made them His very own;  
He bore the burden to Calv'ry.  
And suffered and died alone.

When with the ransomed in glory  
His face I at last shall see,  
'twill be my joy through the ages  
To sing of His love for me.

We could substitute the word *awe* for *amazed*, and the sense is the same. Dennis Johnson, in his very helpful commentary on Revelation, has a section on this portion of Revelation entitled *From Oz to Awe*. "The movie made from Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* is not only a well-worn film classic but also a parable of American life. Young Dorothy, snatched by tornado from her farm home in black-and-white Kansas, awakens in the Technicolor world of Oz, resplendent with the delights and terrors of the imagination. Although Oz is full of wonders, Dorothy longs for home and so begins a pilgrimage to the Emerald City, where, she is told, the great Wizard of Oz can fulfill her longing to return to Kansas. Along the way she meets fellow pilgrims who join her quest to make requests of the wizard: a tin man needing a heart, a lion lacking courage, a scarecrow who longs for a brain. Finally granted

an audience with the wizard, the pilgrims are terrified by the awful flashes of light, smoke, and thunderous voice that assail their eyes and ears – until Dorothy’s little dog, Toto, pulls aside a veil in one corner of the great hall, revealing a little old man operating buttons and levers, speaking into a microphone, and looking very much like the medicine-show huckster back in Kansas . . . the wonderful Wizard of Oz. The wizard’s terrifying splendor is merely the product of technology and savvy marketing, so he could not deliver the gifts sought by the pilgrims. Then again, he does not need to bestow these gifts, for along the path of their pilgrimage the tin man has revealed his compassion, and the scarecrow his ability to think, and even the lion has proved tremulously brave. In other words, through their quest to reach the wizard’s court they have already saved themselves, so all that the wizard needs to do is to certify their accomplishments. This is the perfect parable for self-reliant American individualism. It also exhibits a light-hearted cynicism that suspects that nothing in the universe is worth our wonder. People who can fix themselves are not easily impressed by anyone who presents himself as bigger or better than they are. Is anyone or anything intrinsically worthy of awe? Or can we rest in the confidence that what made previous generations marvel and tremble can be explained and therefore rendered ordinary after all? The loss of awe in the modern world could be attributed to the expansion of scientific understanding, the democratic impulse in world politics, or our growing technological capacity to simulate the miraculous on film, television, and computer screens, where we can create a virtual world in which anything can happen but nothing actually happens. Yet the attempt to replace awe with explanation and artifice fails to convince people who, though they deny or ignore it, are nevertheless created in the image of the God who is awesome in glory. The reduction of human experience to the explicable is a desperate act of faith in our power to create reality (*what we cannot explain cannot exist*), but this faith cannot satisfy. Into the vacuum of transcendence created by naturalism and technolatriy, New Age spirituality is rushing, promising the experience of mystery and awe turned inward, without the troubling concept of accountability to the Creator.”<sup>1</sup>

- I. ***THE SCENE: THE COURTROOM IN HEAVEN.*** “A single Greek word (*ouranos*) is used for the English terms *sky* and *heaven*. The easiest way to conceptualize the biblical understanding is with the notion of the *three heavens* (see Paul’s reference to the *third heaven* in 2 Cor. 12:2), though other intertestamental Jewish literature refers to five, seven, and even ten heavens. The first heaven is the atmospheric heaven, the *sky*, where birds fly and clouds appear (for example, Matt. 16:3). The second heaven is the planetary heaven, also the *sky*, where sun, moon, and stars are located (for example Heb. 11:12). It was easy for ancients – and for modern people when we speak by appearance rather than scientifically – not to distinguish these two very carefully. Together these two are found in contrast to the earth; thus *heaven and earth* make up all the creation (for example Matt. 24:35). What John saw was a *door in the sky*. Others see the first heaven combining the atmosphere and the planets while the second was an invisible field of battle where angels and demons fought, possibly described in Eph. 2:2 where Satan is the prince of the power of the air. The third heaven is the blessed dwelling of God and the angelic orders. In the first century, Jewish people so closely connected heaven and God that they often substituted *heaven* for *God* (for example, the references to the *kingdom of heaven*, as in Matt. 5:3; see also Matt. 21:25). Nowhere does the Bible discuss the intriguing question of the spatial relationship between the third heaven – which God created – and the rest of his dominion.”<sup>2</sup>
  
- II. ***THE THRONE OF GOD.*** John does not describe God as such: “The central figure is God enthroned in great glory, surrounded by his court of angelic principalities and powers in varying orders. The leading features of the scene are those found in Is. 6:1, Ezk. 1:26-28, Dan. 7:9, 1 Kings 22:19, En. 39-40, Slav. En. 20-22, and elsewhere; but they are here combined and handled with the power of a master hand. No attempt is

made to describe the person of God; the glory of his form manifests itself in brilliant vari-colored light, according to the Hebrew conception of Jehovah dwelling in light (1 Tim. 6:16) and covering himself with light as with a garment (Ps. 104:2).”<sup>3</sup>

- III. **THE COURTIERS AROUND THE THRONE.** There are twenty-four elders sitting on thrones. Boice says that the way the elders are pictured “makes them a natural link with and follow-up to the promise that was given to the churches with Jesus on his throne. White garments signify the elders’ holiness, for they are now in glory. Crowns symbolize their victory over sin. Similarly, Jesus told the church in Sardis, *The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments* (Rev. 3:5) and told the believers in Laodicea, *The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne* (v. 21). There is an expanding picture of the heavenly worshipers throughout Revelation 4 and 5: first, the twenty-four elders and four living creatures; second, innumerable angels; and finally, *every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them* (5:13). But the elders, who represent the church, are mentioned first (see 4:4) and last (see 5:14), since they alone are able to testify to the grace that God showed in their redemption.”<sup>4</sup>
- IV. **HEAVEN’S PRAISE AND ADORATION.** “The elders preface their words of praise with acts of adoration. They prostrate themselves before the Lord and cast their crowns at his feet, acknowledging that all authority derives from him, belongs to him, and returns to him (Rev. 4:10). They then ascribe worthiness to God, the fact that he deserves their awe and adoration as they gladly confess his *glory and honor and power*. An unresolved question of worthiness, of deserved authority and rightful claim, will soon plunge John into deep grief amid this celestial joy (5:2-4). It is the crux of the two-movement throne scene that we are considering. Recognition of the supreme worthiness of God evokes a stabbing, sweet sense of awe, to which our modern hearts may be numbed by self-reliance and cynicism. (Before whom would we risk our dignity by flinging ourselves spontaneously facedown on the pavement?) The elders also support their assertion of God’s worthiness with a rationale: *for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created* (4:11). The praises around the throne move from contemplation of who God is in himself, to his work of creation, and then on to the apex of worthiness, the work of redemption accomplished by the Lamb.”<sup>5</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Two final observations. Doug Kelly points out that “Revelation often shows how the glory that flows over from one Person of the blessed Trinity to the others, also finally encapsulate the people of God. For instance, *the four and twenty elders* (representing Old Testament Israel and New Testament Church) join the four living heavenly creatures as they give . . . *glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, The four and twenty elders fall down before him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things and for thy pleasure they are and were created* (Rev. 4:9-11). They came to see the glory, and it functioned, as it were, as the agent that made them Christians, as they beheld the Father’s glory in the face of Jesus: *But we all with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed unto the same image from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord* (2 Cor. 3:18).”<sup>6</sup> Finally, the great Puritan divine, Stephen Charnock, wrote: “God hath an infinite strength, he hath a strength to bring to pass whatsoever he decrees; he acts without fainting and weakness (Isa. xl. 28), and impairs not his strength by the exercise of it: as God is Lord, he hath a right to enact; as he is almighty, he hath a power to execute; his strength is the executive power belonging to his dominion: in regard of his sovereignty, he hath a right to command all creatures; in regard of his almightiness, he hath power to make his commands be obeyed, or to punish men for the violation of them; his power is that whereby he subdues all creatures under him; his dominion is that whereby he hath a right to

subdue all creatures under him. This dominion is a right of making what he pleases, of possessing what he made, of disposing of what he doth possess; whereas his power is an ability to make what he hath a right to create, to hold what he doth possess, and to execute the manner wherein he resolves to dispose of his creatures. All the other attributes of God refer to this perfection of dominion. They all bespeak him fit for it, and are discovered in the exercise of it (which hath been manifested in the discourses of those attributes we have passed through hitherto). His goodness fits him for it, because he can never use his authority but for the good of the creatures, and conducting them to their true end: his wisdom can never be mistaken in the exercise of it; his power can accomplish the decrees that flow from his absolute authority. What can be more rightful than the placing authority in such an infinite Goodness, that hath bowels to pity, as well as a sceptre to sway his subjects? that hath a mind to contrive, and a will to regulate his contrivances for his own glory and his creatures' good, and an arm of power to bring to pass what he orders? Without this dominion, some perfections, as justice and mercy, would lie in obscurity, and much of his wisdom would be shrouded from our sight and knowledge.”<sup>7</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> D. E. Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R, 2001), p. 95.
- <sup>2</sup> M. Anders and K. H. Easley, *Holman New Testament Commentary: Revelation* (Holman, 1998), p. 82.
- <sup>3</sup> I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 496.
- <sup>4</sup> J. M. Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord: Lessons From The Apocalypse* (P&R, 2020), p. 157.
- <sup>5</sup> D. E. Johnson, op. cit., p. 103.
- <sup>6</sup> D. Kelley, *Systematic Theology: The Beauty of Christ: A Trinitarian Vision* (Mentor, 2014), p. 39.
- <sup>7</sup> S. Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (rpt. Baker, 1996), p. 364.