

Heavenly Worship Theology by +Todd Atkinson

by Todd Atkinson

The sermon teaches that the purpose of the book of Revelation is to show us what heaven is like and to take us up into the mind of God, to show us His perspective.

Scripture: Genesis 28:12, Psalm 139:23-24, John 1:51, John 14:2-3, Philippians 3:20, Colossians 3:1-2, Hebrews 8:5, Revelation 4:1, Revelation 5:13

Topics: "Heavenly Worship", "Eschatology"

Description

This sermon delves into the book of Revelation, emphasizing the vision of heaven shown to John and the purpose of understanding heavenly worship. It explores the concept of heaven and earth merging through worship, highlighting the thin line between the two realms and the transformative power of joining in heavenly worship. The sermon encourages believers to embrace the ache for heaven as a form of worship and to see themselves as part of the same reality as heaven, ultimately aiming for unity and oneness in worship.

Transcript

Let's begin this evening with a reading from the book of Revelation. So, if you would turn to the fourth chapter. I'd like to read from the first eight verses.

So, I mentioned earlier John the Beloved. This is John. The guy who rode out Holy Saturday.

He says, After this I looked, and there before me was a door, standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this. And at once I was in the Spirit.

And there was before me a throne in heaven, with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper, and carnelian, a rainbow resembling an emerald. He encircled the throne.

Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white, and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder.

Before the throne seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center around the throne were four living creatures. They were covered with eyes in the front and the back. The first living creature was like a lion.

The second was like an ox. The third had the face of a man. And the fourth was like a flying eagle.

Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings, day and night. They never stopped saying, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty. Who was and is.

May God add his blessing, and his anointing, to this public reading of Holy Scripture. And all God's people said, Multimedia, if you wouldn't mind just putting the first screen, just the first few verses up for me. Ever wondered why the New Testament ends with the book of Revelation? And what the purpose of this book could be? What we are supposed to draw from it? I think we could have a whole study on possibly what we're not supposed to draw from it.

Especially after hearing Ryan preach this morning. He's on to something. I'm not certain that this book is always used properly.

By which I mean, it's not always used for its original purpose, its intended purpose. I think I could make a solid case for that from Scripture. To use it to figure out the exact time and the manner of Christ's return.

But what if the book of Revelation had an altogether different purpose? Revelation chapter 4 verse 1, a voice spoke to the apostle John and says, Come up here and I will show you some things. What happens if God wants to show us some things? What happens if God wants to show His church some things? And what He wants to show us is what's happening in heaven. What heaven is like.

The kinds of things that happen in heaven. And the first thing that God showed him in heaven was a throne. Heaven is not in a state of chaos.

It is not in a state of despair. It is not discouraged. It is not in a state of worry.

God is not wringing His hands with worry. And so on any given day, anything that could bother me, one of the things I look up, and I seek to look through that door, I look into heaven and I ask Him, Are you worried? Does it bother you? Are you discouraged by this? I guess I don't need to be. And then John sees other things, the incredible things that are happening around that throne.

So there's a throne, there's things happening around that throne. What are the things that are happening around the throne? One thing, and that's worship. Heaven is a place where there's a throne, God is in dominion, God is reigning in the universe, and there is worship happening around His throne.

What advantage is it to us to peer through the door of heaven, to look into heaven itself, what advantage is there for us in seeing the worship of heaven? Why would that be a good thing for us? A couple of things. First of all, it shows us where our worship is heading. It shows us what God has in mind for our worship.

It shows us where the Holy Spirit is wishing to take us. And so I encourage you to give yourself time to study the book of Revelation. Do not study it to try to figure out the chronology of end times.

It is a series of visions, and the purpose of those visions is to take us up into the mind of God, to show us how He sees things, His perspective, and to show us what heaven is like. We will understand where the Holy Spirit is taking us, because the worship there is perfect. Our worship here is still being perfected.

So He wants us to look at perfect worship. So study worship in the book of Revelation. Get an idea of what that worship is like, and you will understand where we are going.

The imperfect looking to the perfect so that our worship might be perfected. In the Old Testament, God gave Moses the plans for the building of the tabernacle. He said to Moses, Build me a dwelling place.

The first time he would have heard those words, it would have shaken him to the core, because God was always thought of as the one that dwells in heaven. And God says, Build me a home on earth. He never could have conceived that the God of the universe would want to live both in heaven and on earth.

Have a home on earth? And He gave him the plans for the building of the tabernacle. There wasn't a lot of explanation for why those plans. Why did it have to be like that? Just plans.

Here's the plans, build it like this. No explanation. But in the New Covenant, the Old Covenant is explained and illuminated.

And so the book of Hebrews explains that the reason God gave Moses such detailed plans for the building of the tabernacle is because it was meant to reflect a heavenly tabernacle. To resemble things that go on in heaven. Heavenly realities.

That if God is going to dwell in heaven and God is going to dwell on earth, He wants this home to resemble that home. The same is true of the New Testament church. He wants this home to resemble that home.

He wants this home to reflect that home. And we'll discover why. So why does He want us to look into heaven? Why does He want us to study and learn the worship of heaven? Number one, it'll show us where we're going.

I mean, there's certain things. I may not know exactly how that might play out. The four living creatures.

I'm convinced this is why Rob is growing his hair long because he's looking like that lion. He's got a mane. That's just my theory.

I like it. I like it. He's been studying the book of Revelation for years, this worship of heaven, and somehow that lion has got into him.

That's just my theory. Steve and Barbara, look at him. That guy is working out.

He's strong as an ox. He's strong, that guy. I won't go through any more of our stuff.

Notice those were compliments. Handsome as a lion, strong as an ox. I just don't want there to be negative reprisals upon myself.

Secondly, He wants us to see the worship of heaven. Because when we look, it shows us something. That worship doesn't start with us.

It doesn't begin and end with us. Long before we start worshiping, guess what? Worship is always going on. Heaven cannot stop worshiping Jesus.

It's going on around the clock, every minute of every day of every week. And so we've got short attention spans as humans. And we've only got so much energy.

So we kind of think, well, we're going to start to worship. No, we're not. I mean, that's why God created tireless beings.

And so when we study the worship of heaven, we realize that worship is always ready going on, and we get to simply join in. So worship is not about you. Remember, I mean, it's about Jesus.

But even the worshiping community, we get to just join in something bigger than ourselves. And when we do join in, something happens. Notice what happened this morning at the Lord's table? That's why God will even let you feel your flatness sometimes.

Worship doesn't begin and end with you. It's already going on, and you get to be a privileged part of it. But when we will, when we will share in, join in with, something occurs at that moment.

A couple things. Number one, we are drawn up into it. It's not just worship that's happening in heaven.

When we say we'll participate, we'll join in with this. We are then drawn up into it, and it is drawn down into us, which is why the very atmosphere changes, and it becomes charged with the atmosphere of heaven. So it's nonsense thinking that somehow worship is great if you sing in a particular key.

It's just manipulating human emotions. What changes in the atmosphere is when you join in with the worship of heaven. Now you're part of something bigger than yourself, and at that point something happens.

You are drawn up into it, and heaven gets drawn down to us. And everybody knows, whoa, we are in a different realm now. We are in a different realm.

And so there is something ascending about worship, joining in with something higher and greater than ourselves. But there's something else that occurs when we see the worship of heaven, and we join with it. So every time we've been worshiping over the last number of weeks, I tell myself this.

It doesn't matter how I feel. Worship is going on for heaven 24 hours, and I get to join in with it, participate in it, and something happens in my worship every day. Every time.

Here's the other thing that happens. When we join in with the worship of heaven, the line between heaven and earth becomes thin. The separation between heaven and earth becomes thin.

And something that is already true of us, or true for us, but something of which we're barely aware, we don't really quite get, but it is true of us. Something that is true of us becomes real, or it becomes manifest. And it's this.

That because of the redemptive work of Jesus, the heaven and the church are not actually two separate realities. But they are two parts of the exact same reality. So when we worship, that actually literally begins to happen.

You begin to actually enter into the reality of that. That heaven and earth, or our part of earth, the redeemed part of earth, the church, instead of feeling like they're polar opposites, we realize, oh, I don't think they're that separate. The line starts to get very, very thin.

And we realize we are two parts of the exact same reality. Sometimes that phrase, heaven and earth, is used a lot in Scripture. And sometimes when we hear the phrase, it sounds like opposites.

Heaven and earth. Big and small. Soft and hard.

Like they're opposites. And without Christ, it's true, there is an impenetrable line between heaven and earth. You cannot cross over it.

There is a complete separation. But through Christ's incarnation, His descent from heaven to earth, and through His ascension, His ascent from heaven and earth, all of the rules change. It has made some things possible that were completely possible and impossible and against the laws of God before.

It has completely changed all the rules. The incarnation, as Christ coming from heaven and earth, made it possible for God to come to us in our sin, in our pain, in our brokenness. But the ascension made it possible for us to come to Him in His glory and beauty and splendor and majesty.

And so there's these realities. When we join with the worship of heaven, there's ascent and descent. There's us ascending in Him, us going to a place.

I feel like, as an old revivalist, I preached all the time on descent. It's a good theme. Lord, rend the heavens and come down.

But I know, I know the Lord is going to be teaching us about Revelation chapter 4. Come up here. Come up here. I'm going to teach you how to ascend now.

Why do we get to ascend? John says, I looked and there was a door. That door, without Christ, was completely closed and locked to us. The door between heaven and earth was impenetrable.

But John, the beloved, looks and he says, I saw a door standing open. It was open to him. The door between heaven and earth was open and he's being invited to come through that door.

And beloved, the Lord is going to teach us that like John the beloved, we who have went through Holy Saturday, times of disappointment and peril, times of pain and discouragement, we will stand, we will trust, we will believe. And you will see a door standing open from heaven and the voice of heaven saying, the door is now open to you. It was always open, but now you'll understand it.

And it says, come up here. There's an open door between heaven and earth to you now. Oh, someone's got to be enjoying this.

Heaven and earth are no longer polar opposites. They're no longer separate. At least the redeemed part of this earth called the church.

And to heaven, we're simply two parts of the same reality. Like it, liken it a little bit to Hawaii in that it is separated by space, but it's not a separate country from the U.S. I mean, I don't really liken Lethbridge to Hawaii in many other ways. But imagine this island separated by space, but not a different country.

Same law, same currency, same culture. We're separated from heaven only by a dimension, but no other way. The same laws, the same currency, the same culture, the same atmosphere, the same glory, the same spirit, the same worship.

And you will see these two beginning to merge. I like Revelation chapter 5, 13. It says, I heard every creature in heaven and on earth singing the same song.

So his first vision of heaven, all he sees is what is going on in heaven. The next vision he sees, heaven and earth are joined together in worship and they're singing the exact same song. In other words, oneness.

There's unity. One church separated only by a dimension. One church.

One God. One savior. One spirit.

All singing the exact same song in worship to him. I heard every creature in heaven and on earth saying to him who sits on the throne. Much could be said about that because, interesting, we have learned about liturgy.

They're singing a liturgy. They're all singing the same liturgy. Why? One people singing in one voice to one God.

So another time, do a study of the unity. The unity between heaven and earth. A thin place.

In Scotland, in the 6th century, there's a man came from Ireland called Columba. His name shifted over different times. Columseal originally.

Came to be known as Columba or Saint Columba. Who set up his mission station on the island of Iona. And it became, in many ways, a center of Scottish spirituality, of Scottish Christianity.

So much so that the kings of old would want to go there to be coronated or there to be buried. I don't know how many kings are buried on this little island of Iona. It's considered a holy place.

And people prayed there. First time I ever went to Scotland just on a, doing revival meetings. Never been, no I haven't been there for a few days.

Just a few days of holiday. It rained so much I didn't see anything. But we're having, I mean Cumbernauld, and we are having, I mean revival meetings.

The Lord is moving. And the Lord tells me, hand your team over to your associate. I need you to go spend three days of prayer.

In the middle of revival. And I want you to go to the island of Iona and spend three days of prayer. Okay, figure out where is the island of Iona.

Some young man kind of drove me there. Dropped me off at the ferry and I went for three days of prayer. The very last night.

I had good times of prayer. Very last night I came in. Very wet and cold.

I did not have proper attire. So I didn't know that the land could be that soggy. So I would have to put plastic bags over my socks.

And then inside my boots. So I come home. And you have to wear everything you own to try to keep warm.

So I just start to get these layers off and the Lord tells me you're not done yet. And it's 10.30, 10 o'clock at night. He tells me, you get dressed.

I want you to go and lay in the ancient ruins where Saint Columba used to pray. And lay there with a stone as your pillow. It didn't make sense to me at all.

Go lay there with a stone as your pillow. And you pray till midnight. So I go find these ruins.

And I'm laying there and I'm shivering cold. And I don't feel a thing. And I can see a little, kind of, people having a keli nearby.

A little stone cottage. And you can do the fun and the lights. And I'm thinking, I should be in there.

And it just frees me. I don't feel anything of God. And I start thinking, I must have got this wrong.

But this is just a bad idea. Laying on a cold, wet, damp ground. And it's just not fun at all.

But the idea goes through my head. What happens if God did tell me and I leave before midnight? So I stuck it out. And at 10 minutes to midnight, the glory of the Lord filled those ancient ruins.

And I had an encounter such that I could barely tell the things I saw. But I saw new movements. This is a long time ago.

I saw movements. God raising up movements on the face of the earth. Numbers of them.

And how they would feature into his plans. They call Iona a thin place. The distance between heaven and earth there is not very big.

It was my experience. I was in Assisi. We went to Italy on our 20th wedding anniversary.

And Sherry and I ended up in Assisi. I could not stop praying in that town. I just couldn't stop praying.

And then I'm actually at the church that St. Francis rebuilt. And there's his vision. God's saying to him, my church, I want to make a glorious church.

And I'm like, that sounds like our vision. I can't stop praying. The next day we went down to, there was Francis' tomb.

And it was only not really very interesting to me at all. But I thought I'd go see it. But when I get down there, I can't stop praying.

And I'm thinking, I don't have any theology for this. The presence of God was so thick there. They've been praying at that place for a thousand years, at that little town.

A thousand years of prayer. Wow, that was a thin place. God's will is that his church everywhere is supposed to be a thin place.

Not just this random place and that random place. This is, this is his dream for the redeemed. He redeemed us to make it a thin place.

He redeemed us to join heaven and the church so that these are not polar opposites. These are not two different places. Just two parts of the exact same reality.

And if we could believe that, if we could tear to enter into that by faith, the heavenly things that we would begin to see. Timothy Ware, who I had the privilege of meeting once in England, wrote this book on the Orthodox Church. It's the classic on the subject.

And he describes in the book how Christianity came to the Russian people. And he writes this. Vladimir, prince of Kiev, was still a pagan, desiring to know which was the true religion.

And therefore he sent his followers to visit the various countries of the world. They first went to the Muslim Bulgars of the Volga. But his emissaries came back and reported there is no joy among them.

So they went on looking. Other traditions, other ways of telling the stories, it wasn't for them. But finally they journeyed to Constantinople to a Byzantine church.

And they were so touched by this experience they went back to Vladimir and told him this. We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. When they walked into the church, they said we couldn't even tell whether we were in heaven or on earth.

Remember, these are pagans. Looking for a religion for the entire Roman people. For surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon the earth.

We can't even describe to you what we saw. Only this we know, that God dwells amongst those people. That's my dream.

That the church of our nation would be a place that when pagans come in, people that do not believe, they'd say, whoa. Did I just walk into a building or into another dimension? Because I actually can't tell whether I'm on heaven or earth anymore. That's actually a pretty good question.

Are you in heaven or actually on earth? Because the church, it's meant to be virtually indistinguishable. Genesis chapter 28 is a wonderful and famous story. Because one of the patriarchs, Jacob, has a dream there.

We've talked about tough times in our life. Well, Jacob is in the toughest time of his life. The most painful time of his life.

For sure. And he falls to sleep in the night. And listen, it says this.

He took a stone as his pillow. It wasn't until later I came home and thought, I should preach. I felt Lord tell me to preach on this text.

And as I'm preaching and I'm going, oh, now it's starting to make sense. He took a stone as his pillow. And he had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth and its top reaching to heaven.

And the angels of God were ascending and descending. Ascent, descent. Both.

It's a messianic prophecy. Guess who the stairway is? Guess who the one who bridges heaven and earth is? And the angels are doing this as a way of illustrating. It's not just that through this stair people will go to heaven.

But on this stairwell, heaven will come to earth. And there above it stood the Lord at the top. It's always pointing to the Lord.

So much more could be said. The beginning of the gospel according to John. The very first chapter he has an encounter with a man called Nathanael.

He tells Nathanael some things and Nathanael loves it. Like Nathanael believes easily. Sometimes it's taken a while to convince me.

But Nathanael, he was quick to believe. Easy to believe. And so Jesus was so impressed by him.

He says, you believe? Just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? Wow. You're going to see greater things than this. Guess what the greater things was? I tell you the truth, you'll see heaven open.

And you will see angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. He's the stair. You will see heaven open.

We've heard a lot about that over the last days. You will see an open heaven. And you will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

I will make this possible in other words. Now do I think that if we fully understood the ascension and the implications for us, do I think for a moment that as Christians we wouldn't face tribulations? Do I think for a moment that we still wouldn't face hard times? No. I think the difference is I just walk on top of them instead of them on me.

That's the ascension. I'd be above them instead of beneath them. Whatever the Lord throws my way, whatever life throws my way, I just want to walk above it instead of be crushed beneath it.

That's what the ascension makes possible. Because it takes you to heaven, it opens a door, and it shows you an entirely new way of seeing things. And when your lungs breathe in the air of heaven, which is the air called home, so I promise you when I'm in the thick presence of the Lord, I promise you there is no place in all this world that I feel more at home.

Which is why when we're not, guess what our heart does to tell you, to remind you where home is? Your heart aches. And so in my dark years I learned that that ache is a form of worship. That actual ache, when you can't be breathing in the air of heaven, is one of the most beautiful forms of worship that there is.

So you think something must be wrong with me. No, something is actually right with you. Don't you love being missed? You ever weigh in and someone says, I miss you? Isn't that special? I'm sure we're all made different, but I really love that.

If someone says, I missed you? When I ache for heaven, that's my way of saying, I'm really missing you. Like, I'm not actually quite the same without you. I'm actually, what do the apostles say? Heaven is my citizenship.

My true home, my true nature. And it's that ache that causes the descent. It's that ache that lifts us and brings heaven down.

That ache is your greatest friend. You need it. And Jesus works through it to create the transformation of heaven, the transformation of his church.

So don't shut that ache off. I know, I wanted to.

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