

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

An Exposition of Revelation 4:8

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I. INTRODUCTION:

In the book *The Disciplemaker: What matters to Jesus the Most*, by Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, Dr. Ron Allen, who wrote the forward, tells the following story:

Many who visit the Holy Land have a hope in their heart that they might be able to walk today where Jesus actually walked nearly two thousand years ago. Despite the distance in time and circumstance, modern pilgrims still have this desire. There are several places in Israel where one can feel she or he is near to where Jesus had been so long ago. But, amazingly, there are some places in Israel where a person may actually say, “*Here is where Jesus actually stood. Here He walked.*”

This sense of place can be achieved today more than anytime since the actual days of Jesus. This is particularly true in Jerusalem when one sits on the southern steps of the ancient Temple, or when one stands on the pavement at the southwest corner of the Kotel, the famous Temple foundation wall.

On one visit a few years ago we had an Israeli archaeologist who did not share our faith in the person and work of Savior Jesus, but who was exasperated with the seeming nonchalance of some members of our group. They were intent on taking pictures, but he felt they seemed emotionally distant from what we were doing. Zvi shouted:

“Don’t you realize where you are? This is more than a photo-op! You are actually standing where your Jesus stood. Do you really believe in Him? Where are your tears? Where are your shouts? Why no laughter? *Show me you feel something!*”

Ron Allen comments, “It took an unbelieving Jewish archeologist to shake up some members of our group to come to terms with the enormity of their experience.”

Ladies and gentlemen, do we in the same way realize the enormity of our privilege, our opportunity to worship the One sitting on the throne?

Transition:

- A. Last time we gathered to study Revelation 4 4-11 I stated that Revelation 4 gives us certain truths about those who surround Him in this future heavenly vision:
1. First, the 24 elders and the four living creatures continuously worship God. They do not cease. **They know their purpose.**
 2. Their activity of worship is God-centered. No attention is drawn to them. There is no first person in their claims of worship. **They know what really counts.**
 3. Notice their location: they are in God’s presence. The 24 elders encircle the throne. They fall before Him. The four living creatures are in the midst and

around the throne. If they are worshipping Him continuously, they never leave His presence. **They know where to be.**

4. The content of their worship is most biblical: they continuously bring attention to God and His holiness, eternity, and worthiness. **They know what to offer Him.**
 5. Note the disposition of the 24 elders: They fall down and they cast their crowns. Whether these crowns are crowns of rewards or rulership, what is absolutely clear is that **they know who their God is and what to offer Him.**
 6. I also said chapter 4 also gives us a central truth about Him in view of the beings that surround Him?
- B. All they do is reflect who He is for He alone is worthy of their worship. Ever in His presence they glorify the One sitting on the throne. Do we?
- C. But what does glory mean? What does it mean to glorify God; and how do we do glorify God?

1. In essence, glory “*means showing or making visible.*”¹ Or as Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost states, “*Glory is displayed excellence.*”²
2. In Scripture we see He his glory in creation, the revelation of God’s glory, through the Tabernacle, & through Jesus Christ. We also see from Scripture that He glories not just in what He has done but in who He is. He glories in the perfection of His person. He glories in the infinite scope of all His perfections.

For example: God loves with such an infinite love that He gave His Son to be the Savior. God shows mercy to a sinner and finds delight in that display of mercy. And God’s holiness is such that he finds delight in providing the enablement for His children to reflect His holiness.

3. Ladies and Gentlemen: Do you realize that throughout Scripture when God reveals Himself, a response to that revelation is demanded?

Consider creation: God has revealed His existence to all humanity by creative design both in his design of humanity and in his design that surrounds humanity (e.g., nature; our position in the galaxy). Suppression of that revelation leads to justifiable eternal condemnation. Anyone who positively receives that revelation cultivates the opportunity to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and experience eternal life upon receiving the free gift of salvation.

A rebel was walking along the road to Damascus. He was intent on killing every Christian believer. Suddenly before this man Saul shone a light that was brighter

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Transformed by His Glory* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 26.

² J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Glory of God* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1978), 8.

than the noonday sun. That was a revelation of the glory of God to Saul. What did he do? He fell on his face and said, “Lord what will you have me do?”³

In sum, as you move through the Scripture exploring the revelation of God, it becomes apparent that there are always two elements: revelation and response. First, there is the revelation, and then a response to that revelation. “*When God reveals Himself, a response is demanded. When man responds to that revelation of glory as befits that revelation, man is glorifying God.*”⁴

4. This evening I am going to focus on the future revelation John received and recorded regarding His Word, by examining the first expression of worship by the four living creatures to God in Revelation 4:8

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come.”

Afterwards, I will ask how we should respond to that revelation so that we may appropriately glorify God by asking “*Lord, what will you have us do?*”

II. EXPOSITION OF REVELATION 4:8:

- A. **“The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying:”**

**“Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!”**

- B. Making a few observations of this verse let me first turn to the timing of the worship.
 1. The four living creatures offer constant praise before God by John’s statement, “*they do not rest day or night.*” To be sure, this does not mean that they have no other duty.
 2. In fact, another duty they do have which is revealed in Scripture is that the four living creatures are responsible for summoning the 4 horsemen to come forward and advance against rebellious humanity. For example:

Revelation 6:1-3:

“Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, ‘Come and see. 2. And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.”

We see this again in Revelation 6:3 with the second living creature.
We see this again in Revelation 6:5 with the third living creature.

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

We see this again in Revelation 6:7 with the fourth living creature.

3. This does not violate that statement regarding their ceaseless praise, because the phrase because “*they do not rest*” refers to a kind of time expressed rather than the extent of time. By analogy when the Apostle Paul states by his own labor he supports himself “*by night and by day*” (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8), he does not mean that he worked around the clock at earning money. Rather, he did night labor and day labor to provide funds to live on.
4. In the same way, the four living creatures have no rest from their occupation with offering tribute to God. This is their consuming practice whenever they are not otherwise engaged in carrying out God’s will. Whenever they do this, their offering of praise becomes the invitation for the twenty-four elders to do the same.

C. This song of the four living creatures focuses on three of God’s infinite perfections:

1. God’s holiness,
2. God’s omnipotence, &
3. God’s eternity.

The attributes we are about to examine are central to the forthcoming seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments of the Great Tribulation.⁵

So, let’s begin by examining God’s holiness.

D. The threefold ascription to holiness to God (*Hagios hagios hagios*) “*Holy, holy, holy*” (sometimes referred to as the *Trisagion*) draws a fitting illustration Isaiah 6:3, “*Holy, holy, holy.*”

1. In Isaiah 6:3 we have the Seraphim declaring the holiness of God. They say, “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.*”

Nelson Study Bible: To say the word “*holy*” in Hebrew twice is to describe someone as “*most holy.*” To say the word *holy* three times intensifies the idea to the highest level. We might re-translate this statement by saying “*Holy, exceedingly holy.*” God is not merely *holy* or even *holy, holy*. He is *holy, holy, holy*.

2. Shaken by the by the voice of him who cried, and with the house filled with smoke, Isaiah cried out:

“Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

E. Like the Seraphim of Isaiah six the Four Living Creatures sing “*Holy, holy, holy*”. Some have attempted to say that the threefold repetition of *holy* refers to the Trinity; but

⁵ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 125.

one is be hard-pressed to say that this is the intent for this statement by the four living creatures- though we know from Scripture that all members of the Godhead are holy (e.g., Jesus called the “*Holy One*” by the angel Gabriel in his announcement to Mary in Luke 1:35; Holy Spirit (Psalm 51:11; Isaiah 63:10-11).

But what I do find very interesting to me that of all the attributes or perfections one can offer to God in His presence, both the Seraphim and the Four Living Creatures both begin their praise by a threefold repetition of the word “*holy*.” Why not focus on attributes or perfections? Maybe it is because when you are in God’ presence it becomes all too clear that He is completely separate from all creation and altogether unique. He is God; there is no other.

What does the word “*holy*” mean? The primary meaning of holy is separate. It comes from an ancient word that meant, “*to cut, or to separate*.” Perhaps even more accurate would be the phrase, ‘a cut above something.’ When we find a garment or another piece of merchandise that is outstanding, that has a superior excellence, we use the expression that it is ‘a cut above the rest’ (Quote from R.C. Sproul).

This means that God who is holy is uniquely and exceedingly holy, with no rivals or competition. He is transcendently separate. In other words, “*God is so far above beyond us that He seems almost foreign to us.*” Exodus 15:11 states it so well:

“Who is like Thee among the gods, O Lord? Who is like Thee, majestic in Holiness. Awesome in praises, working wonders?” (Exodus 15:11).”

God is holy because He is unique, totally separate in nature from all His creatures. God is also set apart in a morally pure sense. God is holy in a morally pure sense. Remember the words in Habakkuk concerning God, “*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong*” (Hab. 1:13).

Listen to the words of R.C.H. Lenski in his comment on Revelation 4:8:

“This [God’s holiness] which separates God infinitely from all that is sin and sinful in a way such as no pagan ever conceived.”⁶

Ladies and Gentlemen: The idea of this word “*holy*” is never exhausted by the idea of purity. So, we can conclude that holiness is transcendent purity. God is the absolutely Holy One, in His purity, majesty, and glory.

Next, we see that this praise of holiness leads to an affirmation of his omnipotence: He is the Almighty. “**Lord God the Almighty.**”

This is a title by which the God is already known in Revelation 1:8. “**I am the Alpha and the Omega,**”, “**who is and was and who is to come, the Almighty.**”

- F. It is also a title especially applied to God as the series of wrathful acts against a rebellious world moves to its climax. We see this title at least 7 more times in the Book of Revelation (11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22).

⁶ R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: Interpretation of Revelation*, 186

- G. What does this mean that He is the “**Lord God the Almighty**?” The One seated upon the throne is the omnipotent One. He is in the unique position to administer justice in a creation that has chosen to disregard His standards of righteousness. The living beings acknowledge God as the sole possessor of this right to administer justice upon His creation.
- H. God, who is infinitely morally pure, is completely separate from all creation; He is altogether unique. God is also all powerful.
- I. The unregenerate on earth will know that the judgments that follow flow from His hands flow from Him who is perfectly holy and who is all-powerful
- J. So, the praise of holiness leads to an affirmation of His omnipotence. The affirmation of His absolute power leads to the third tribute in Revelation 4:8: “***Who was and is and is to come.***” *Or re-translate it: Who was and who is and who is coming.*

Here we have a title of God that describes His being as being eternal: Having no beginning and no end. He is self-existent.

- K. This title of the Father was first encountered in Revelation 1:4 (cf. Rev. 1:8; 11:17). With one finger still remaining on 4:8, turn back to Revelation 1:4 for I want to show you something by comparing both 4:8 with 1:4:
 1. In Revelation 1:4: “Grace to you and peace from Him ***who is and who was and who is to come.***”
 2. “*Who was*” in Revelation 1:4 is mentioned first but in Revelation 4:8 it is placed in the second position of this threefold who statement.
 3. Is there any significance? I would say that there is a shift of emphasis. In Revelation 1:4 the title immediately draws attention to His present existence by stating first, “*Who is.*” In Revelation 4:8 by drawing attention to “*who was*” in Revelation 4:8 The Four Living Creatures are drawing attention to God’s activity as the Creator. Let’s return to Revelation 4:8.
 4. Notice again in Revelation 4 whose making this statement: The Four Living Creatures who have heads that seem to symbolize different aspects of nature. If the four different heads of the Four Living Creatures are intended to represent different aspects of nature: the wild beasts (like a lion), domesticated animals (like an ox), human beings (face like a human), and flying creatures (like an eagle), then this motif of God’s activity as Creator is intensified.⁷
 5. This is reaffirmed because after this statement in 4:8, the 24 elders fall down before God, casting their crowns before Him saying, “*You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things. And by your will they exist and were created.*” All praise centers in His creative powers as the eternal One.

⁷ Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 77.

6. This statement of eternity is reaffirmed in verses 9-10:

Verse 9: The living creatures: “Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives for ever and ever.”

Verse 10: “The twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and forever...”

7. So, just in the three consecutive verses 8-11 we have God as being eternal, the Self-existent One, stated three times.

L. Taken all three phrases together this is what we see:

The Four Living Creatures worship God who is holy, all-powerful, and eternal. As a prologue to the Great Tribulation, God is thoroughly entitled to bring forth divine judgments against His own creation in order to return it to its original holy state.⁸

III. WHAT IS OUR RESPONSE TO THIS REVELATION?

- A. I want to focus the remainder of our time on the issue of holiness because of the command in 1 Peter 1:15-16: “*But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’*” In fact, the same word for “*holy*” in Revelation 4:8 is used in 1 Peter 1:15-16.
- B. What is the mental picture you have when you think of holiness?
- C. Do you think of holiness as something for monasteries and radical legally minded religious fundamentalists who scorn grace, fearful that we might abuse the liberty we have in Jesus Christ.
- D. Do you imagine people walking in single file chanting, wearing beards, sandals, & long robes? Do you imagine stone cells, hours upon hour of fasting, hours upon hours of prayer, and self-humiliation, and no sexual intimacy?
- E. Or do you imagine black and white suits, everyone speaking in the vernacular of the *King James version*, pushing a finger into your chest, with burrowed eyebrows, wanting to know, from sunrise to sunset, everything you do and what you didn’t do.
- F. Holiness sounds somewhat scary if not repulsive, doesn’t it? But nevertheless, here is the command. In our behavior, our conduct we are to be holy. Interestingly, we are not called to be all-powerful or all-knowing as God is, but we are commanded to be holy.

Like S. Charnock states in his work on the attributes of God:

⁸ Thomas, *Revelation*, 363.

“This is the prime way of honoring God. We do not so glorify God by elevated admiration, or eloquent expressions, or pompous services of Him, as when we aspire to a conversing with Him with unstained spirits, and live to Him in living like Him.”

- G. To be sure, becoming holy is not an attainment; it is a state into which God in His grace delivers us into the moment we believe: the sinner becomes the saint. Yet we who are in Christ are commanded to conform to Christ in our moment-by-moment behavior as pilgrims passing through this land (cf. the concept of abiding; John 15; we must learn, abide, and obey).

If am to be holy because He is holy then here are six points of application that may help us in obeying this command especially if reflecting His holiness is displaying excellence. But as I list these points of application let’s remind ourselves that while we look to Jesus Christ to see how we ought to live, we look to the Holy Spirit to make it happen. The Holy Spirit uses the word of God to change our lives. But knowing the truth is not enough; we must welcome the truth, and we do so by conforming ourselves to it, always depending upon Him on bended knee.

1. **Cultivate the desire to be a holy man or woman of God.** A.W. Tozer says, *“Every man is as holy as he really wants to be. But the want must be all compelling.”*⁹
2. **In your decision-making, think as God thinks and will as God wills.** Holiness evidences itself in the decisions we make and things we do, hour by hour-day-by-day.
3. **Be resolved never to do anything which you would be afraid to do if it were the last hour of your life.** Like Jim Elliot stated, *“Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God.”*
4. **Develop an intimacy with God with utmost reverence in mind.**
 - a. Psalm 89:7 states, *“God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be held in reverence by all those around all Him Him”* (Psalm 89:7).”
 - b. Psalm 99:5 states, *“Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His footstool-He is holy.”* Yes, at the “footstool”- in the lowest posture of humility, prostrate your heart, your mind, your disposition before Him. The more we are awed by His infinite perfect holiness, the more inclined we will be to approach Him in a manner that He deserves. The crudeness, the nonchalant attitude, almost flippant mindset we may have when we go before His throne of grace, may begin to fade.
5. **Never tolerate activities that are not in keeping with a holy God.** Place every detail of life under the scrutiny of God Himself. Consider the words of A.W. Tozer. Tozer prays:

⁹ A.W. Tozer, *Gems From Tozer*, pp. 68-69.

Father, I want to know thee, but my coward heart fears to give up its toys. I cannot part with them without inward bleeding, and I do not try to hide from Thee the terror of the parting. I come trembling, but I do come. Please root from my heart all those things which I have cherished so long and which have become a very part of my living self so that Thou mayest enter and dwell there without a rival. Then shalt Thou make the place of Thy feet glorious. Then shall my heart have no need of the sun to shine in it, for Thyself wilt be the light of it, and there shall be no night there. In Jesus' name. Amen [*The Pursuit of God*].

- 6. Authentic holiness points people to Jesus Christ.** If your disposition, mindset, and activities of holiness are not drawing others to Jesus Christ, it is not the right kind of holiness. We are not called to draw attention to ourselves as we seek to glorify God. Instead, we are called to present, reflect, and show Jesus Christ. I don't want people to look at us and say we are good and noble people or that we doctrinally know our stuff; that brings glory to ourselves. No, I want them to say that we here at Pine Valley Bible Church *intimately* know Jesus Christ. Sure, we need to know rightly in order to behave appropriately. They need to see Jesus Christ through our lives. In other words, people need to see that we are all about Jesus in our thoughts, activities, the way we interact with others, and in the manner in which we live. Stated differently, if glorifying God is displaying excellence, Jesus is the only person worthy of displaying. As Dr. Pentecost once said, "*The spiritual life of the believer is the life of Jesus Christ reproduced in the child of God by means of the Holy Spirit*" [From his awesome work, *Designed to be Like Him*].

IV. CONCLUSION:

"We must continually remind ourselves of the purpose of life. We are not destined to happiness, nor to health, but to holiness. Today we have far too many desires and interests, and our lives are being consumed and wasted by them. Many of them may be right, noble, and good, and may later be fulfilled, but in the meantime God must cause their importance to us to decrease. The only thing that truly matters is whether a person will accept the God who will make him holy. At all costs, a person must have the right relationship with God....Holiness is not simply what God gives me, but what God has given me that is exhibited in my life." ~ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, 1 September "Destiny unto Holiness" (revised on-line edition).

Closing Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father:

It seems more often than not we forget our position as believers in Christ, our adoption as your sons and daughters, and our enormous privilege we have to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. How we pray that we long for nothing but yourself, nothing but holiness, nothing but conformity to your you and your ways. How precious it is to have a tender sense and better apprehension of the mystery of godliness, of true holiness. What an enormous privilege we have to allow Jesus Christ to live in and through us by means of the Holy Spirit. You have given us these desires, and you alone can provide the enablement. Our soul longs for intimacy with you; help us to be more constantly controlled by the Holy Spirit; Help us to put to death our habitual sinful appetites and fleshly tendencies which tend to haunt our footsteps. Father, help us to reflect your holiness; engage us to live more for you. Help us to never be satisfied where we spiritually are but ever so desire to follow you with the passionate resignation to only do your will in the options we consider, in the decisions we make, in the lives we touch, and in the consequences we bear. May

the deepest reaches of our soul constantly proclaim “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty; who was, who is, and is to come.*” In Jesus’ Name. ~ Amen.