5 Worship in heaven

1. Introduction

a. In Exodus 25 – 31 we have the account of Moses receiving detailed instruction concerning the construction of the tabernacle and everything associated with it. He was told what materials everything was to be made of, what dimensions they should be and how they should be decorated and constructed, even down to what colour threads to use for the hangings, and how many loops the curtains should have for hanging and fitting together.

b. The purpose of the tabernacle was to be a worship-centre, the focus of all of Israel's worship and dealings with God. But the important thing that the tabernacle was also intended to do was to re-connect Israel with heaven – the tabernacle that Moses built was a copy of the original tabernacle in heaven.

Hebrews 8:1–5 *Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, [2] a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. [3] For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. [4] Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. [5] They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain."*

c. For Moses to grasp the significance of the tabernacle, and to get a measure of its function and glory, we believe that heaven came down to the top of that mountain and Moses actually saw the original heavenly tabernacle. And what the writer of Hebrews underlines for us is that it is God's desire to replicate on earth amongst his people the things that are realities in heaven. Today we're going to concentrate on worship in heaven, and how we can take the realities that we see in the bible and see what we can learn from them in order to bring our earthly worship closer to that which is offered in the heavenly places.

Exodus 25:1–9 *The LORD said to Moses, [2] "Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me. [3] And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, [4] blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats' hair, [5] tanned rams' skins, goatskins, acacia wood, [6] oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, [7] onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. [8] And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. [9] Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.*

d. When Israel left Egypt they left with a wealth of their treasures. Now God says put these treasures to practical use to make a sanctuary for me. This was entirely voluntary – every man whose heart moves him. In the same way we all have a part in the house of prayer, we all have something of value to bring. It brings sense of ownership, which means we see things from a different perspective. It's not just something we go to, but it's part of who we are.

   i Giving to the tabernacle was costly, they gave up their wealth to give to God. Being in the house of prayer is costly, maybe not in terms of physical wealth, but in terms of time devoted to prayer and worship, seeking God for his heart, studying and understanding his word.

2. The worship of heaven

a. Christina Rosetti was writing according to the culture of the time and was seeking to encapsulate her understanding of the bible in creative terms that would communicate biblical truth to her generation. And she understood that music was at the heart of heavenly worship. In her writings she says: "***Heaven is revealed to earth as the homeland of music.***"

b. Music is a powerful medium – it has the ability to connect with our emotions in a way that nothing else can. Music is a universal language of humankind. It is a powerful but personal way in which we can express ourselves; it is a form of communication which can express the emotions better than words. Everyone likes music – we are surrounded by it – and it has become a prominent feature of our daily life.

   i In every culture on earth, music in one form or another has a place right at the centre, and is often integral to the expression of that culture.

c. In the Old Testament, music is very evident in Jewish life. The people of God have always expressed landmark events through songs. Eg. Song of Moses and the Song of Deborah and many of the Psalms were set to music. Throughout the Old Testament, God's people have expressed their joy, their gratitude and praise (Deuteronomy 32:3), battles (2 Chronicles 20:21f), adoration and thanksgiving (1 Chronicles 16:8-16, Jonah 2:9), encouragement (Isaiah 42) sorrow, sadness, determination and dedication through music. Our songs of love and affection can inspire and touch the heart of God.

d. Why is that? God is a musical God – he loves music. Because we are made in his image, we have the capacity to enjoy and make music, it is integrally woven into the fabric of who we are as image-bearers. Music comes from the heart of God and he puts it into the hearts of human beings.

   i Ludwig van Beethoven said *"Music gives a greater reality than philosophy can aspire to do; it gives us knowledge and understanding of God."*

e. When we read the book of Revelation we discover that heaven is full of songs and phrases and refrains that forever reverberate around the throne of God. It is a recognition and response to the unrivalled glory of the one on the throne.

Revelation 5:8-9 *And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. [9] And they sang a new song…*

Revelation 14:2-3 *And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, [3] and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.*

Revelation 15:2-4 *And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire---and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. [3] And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! [4] Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."*

f. Revelation 4 and 5 show one important reality that is inescapable. God has ordained that as he sits upon his throne at the epicentre of all of the glory of heaven, he is surrounded on every side by orders of creation offering incessant worship. The fact that the bible so clearly places songs and instruments around the throne of God must not be viewed as merely an interesting fact. This revelation must have its full impact upon us – it is foundational to our understanding of worship in heaven and its consequences for us as we approach the throne of God through faith. As a friend of ours once said, "*We must let it inflict a blow to our hearts from which we never hope to recover.*"

g. What does it say about God that in His sovereign freedom He could have had it any way He desired, and we find that He chose to have music and melody filling His governmental throne-room? Of all the things that He could have employed creatures and servants to do, He fashions them and then commands them to **sing and play instruments**. The ramifications of this are far-reaching.

h. Zephaniah 3:17 describes how Yahweh will sing over Israel when he comes to Zion at the end of the age:

Zephaniah 3:17 *The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.*

i. We don't include music in our worship on earth because it makes it easier or more exciting, but because music is integrally woven into the fabric of God's desire and design for worship. The Lord has joined music and worship together, so any attempt to separate them is unbiblical and sheer folly.

j. This revelation is one of the foundational principles of the house of prayer. The wisdom of joining worship and prayer together comes directly from the throne room of heaven. Both worship and prayer are our response to encounter with the one seated on the throne. We have been given access to be heard by God himself as he sits on his governmental throne, and now our worship arises as incense before him, and our prayers are received in the golden bowls of the elders and living creatures. Our worship and our prayers matter to God.

   i Once we understand the value God puts on combining worship and prayer it is an incentive for us to put into practice the substance of the revelation we have received so far. And we don't have to wait until we understand it all before we enter in to the reality of prayer in the context of continuous worship.

3. Antiphonal worship

a. There is an abundance of worship in heaven, and it is all directed towards the one on the throne. Revelation 4 and 5 describe the worship of the 4 living creatures (seraphim) and the 24 elders, they have the closest proximity to the throne. At the end of chapter 5, we are given a further revelation of worship on an even grander scale. It's an example of creation-wide antiphonal singing.

b. What is antiphonal singing? Antiphonal is a Greek-compound word made up of two words: *anti* – meaning *another*, and *phonos* – meaning *sound*. So literally – *another sound*. Basically, it is two groups of people who sing in response to one another, often with a call and response or a repeated refrain as in Psalm 136.

c. In several of the accounts of heavenly worship we see that there is a response that is shared between those involved in ministry around the throne. In Isaiah's description of his encounter with heaven he observes the flow of worship between the seraphim:

Isaiah 6:3 *And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"*

i He draws our attention to the fact that the seraphim are crying out to one another. They continually utter declarations of God's glory responsively as they hover around the throne of God. Similarly, in Revelation 4 the worship from the seraphim provokes a response from the 24 elders. Even with their own unhindered vision of God, the elders 'see' and experience something unique of the glory of God through the praise of the seraphim.

d. And then in Revelation 5 we see how heavenly worship extends far beyond those who are in immediate proximity to the throne of God:

Revelation 5:9-14 *And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, [10] and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." [11] Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, [12] saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" [13] And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!" [14] And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.*

i It begins with the 4 living creatures and the 24 elders

ii The first response is from myriads of angels

iii The next response is from every creature in heaven and earth

iv The back to the 4 living creatures

v And finally the 24 elders once again

e. This is antiphonal worship on the grand scale, and it seems to be part of the liturgy of worship in heaven. What this does is to highlight the added dimension available to us when we worship corporately. When we worship together there is a deeper and richer place that we can go. Whether it's just a few, as in the 4 seraphim, or the multitudes of heaven and earth, when we come into agreement with one another around the worth of the one on the throne, we see the fullness of Psalm 133 unity that takes our hearts to a new level.

i There is a specific order of worship in heaven and that order has a design. Sometimes we don't fully understand these heavenly realities, but we must not let the dullness of our perception cause us to minimise or reject the wisdom behind this revelation of heaven.

4. Three strands of worship

a. In the glimpses of heavenly worship that we have in scripture, there are three principles that become apparent. These three principles are like a cord of three strands, woven together to form a continuous whole. Each strand is important individually, but when combined together

they become an unbreakable whole. Each of the three strands describe how God is worshiped in heaven:

i God is worshiped **universally**
ii God is worshiped **exclusively**
iii God is worshiped **incessantly**

b. These three ways serve as a provocation to us concerning our worship on earth. Churches and prayer rooms are to be a microcosm of the heavenly reality, therefore we must take note of the way things are done in the heavenly sanctuary, and seek to change the way we do things in order to embrace the universal, exclusive and incessant worship around the throne of God.

c. God is worshiped **universally**. He is worshiped by everyone in heaven. No-one dissents from recognising the supreme worth of God. The seraphim, the elders, the archangels, the cherubim and the myriads of servant spirits that inhabit the heavens – every eye is on the one seated on the throne.

Psalm 29:9 *…and in his temple all cry "Glory."*

d. God is worshiped **exclusively**. In heaven there is only one to whom worship is directed. There are no competing objects of attention, affection, or allegiance in the Heavenly Temple – there is only one, all-consuming, absorbing focus of adoration. No angel, living creature, or elder is subtly elevated as to detract from the glory of the only One who is worthy.

Isaiah 45:5 *I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God…*

e. God is worshiped **incessantly**.

Revelation 4:8 *…and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"*

i The worship of heaven far transcends just the activity of the seraphim. However, they are very prominent, being presented as the prime movers in worship. In some way they seem to function as the leaders of worship in the heavenly temple.

ii The words that they declare are unmistakable in their meaning and breath-taking in their significance. The seraphim worship incessantly. Never resting, never ceasing, they declare the glory of God continually and have done so since the moment they were created. Eight-hundred years before John, Isaiah saw them and they were doing exactly the same thing.

iii "Holy, holy, holy" may be a refrain that the seraphim punctuate their worship with. Is it the only thing they say? Their proximity to the throne, and their covering with eyes give them the greatest capacity to observe the glories of God and to declare his worth. Their presence provides a backbone to the constancy of adoration and their proclamation is the anthem that unites the heavenly symphony.

iv Their activity and devotion is a clear testimony that the worship of heaven always has been and always will be perpetual. They are saying something all the time, not just thinking or feeling something as they go about their duties in the Heavenly Temple. There is no-one in heaven who is at a loose end, or does not know what to do.

f. All of this revelation of worship in heaven explains why worship and prayer are inextricably bound together: it is the heavenly model. The King is enthroned in the place where He is

worshipped incessantly. His sovereign rule over heaven and earth proceeds forth from His glorious temple; His everlasting decrees are uttered in the midst of the never-ending choirs of angels and the cries of the seraphim.

5. Heaven on earth in the prayer room

a. With this biblical revelation of worship in heaven as our starting point, how do we translate the glories of heaven into a living reality in the prayer room? First we must see the prayer room as an extension of heaven on earth. Although in the prayer room we can't see with our physical eyes the glories that the inhabitants of heaven are beholding, yet with the eyes of faith we are no less in the presence of the object of our adoration than they are.

b. Catching the brief glimpse of worship in heaven gives us a rich insight into who God is; this in turn gives us a greater insight into who we are and what we were made for. And there can be no greater privilege for us than to join in with the heavenly host in making much of his surpassing worth.

c. We must distinguish between what is central and supreme, and the important but secondary. Unceasing worship and prayer is an end in itself – not because there is so much need that we must constantly intercede, but because the glory of God and the worth of Jesus demand perpetual adoration.

d. Therefore, prayer and worship are inseparable in the sanctuary of God. It is those weak groans, tears, and petitions uttered on the earth that accompanies and mingles with the angelic worship. Revelation 5 and Revelation 8 tell us the intercession that fills the heavenly Temple originates from the saints.

6. Conclusion

a. Understanding the 'what' of the worship of heaven is important, but even more so is the 'why' of the activity that ceaselessly surrounds the throne in the heavenly Temple. We must pursue the revelation of worship in heaven until we can feel the heartbeat of all that goes on there.

b. The angelic host enraptured with ministry to Him have never had a sin forgiven, or an ailment healed, or a financial need met. Their testimony is that His unending glory warrants their unending praise. The only purpose of their worship is to magnify, extol, and proclaim His surpassing glory. the only purpose of their worship is to magnify, extol, and proclaim His surpassing glory.

c. When we truly behold the majesty of Jesus in wisdom we conclude that the only reasonable response is for us to worship Him ceaselessly. This is the testimony of the heavenly assembly and it must be ours too.

Hebrews 12:22-24 *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, [23] and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, [24] and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*