

Forbidden!

The First Hymns of Heaven – Part IV

Revelation 5:8-10

Introduction

We have been given, through the Revelation of John, a front row seat in the symphony hall where the hymns of heaven are being sung.

For the church, raptured and in the presence of God, these are the first hymns heard. What more could be done than to sing of God's glory when confronted with the physical beauty and terror of His throne – encircled by a rainbow, emitting flashes of lightning, with the sounds of thunder crashing, while strange creatures are chanting "Holy, holy, holy."

The first five hymns of heaven in Revelation chapters 4 and 5 are powerful, descriptive, moving, exhilarating expressions of praise to God for His holiness and glory and sovereignty and redemptive work on behalf of mankind.

This is what it is like on the other side.

In each of our past sessions in this series we have discussed the intuitive sense in the human heart of eternity and God. There is a sense in everyone that life goes on after death.

In our generation especially, there is a growing acceptance of the syncretism of religions today. In other words, something is pulled from the Bhagavad Gita – the sacred writings of the Hindus, and something is pulled from the Book of Mormon, and something is pulled from Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science Key, and something is pulled from the Koran – the sacred book of Islam, and these are put together in any way desired with a fair amount of confidence that whatever is right for you, is right – you will make it to the other side, whatever that happens to be. And by the way, pull anything you like from the Bible while you are at it.

Ask those who are tuning in to Oprah Winfrey's radio show on which Marianne Williamson is teaching the *Course in Miracles*, "Do you believe in God?" and they will answer, "Absolutely." Ask them, "Do you believe in the Bible?" and they will say, "Of course!"

Eckhart Tolle, a well-known author and repeated guest on Oprah's television show, references the Bible twenty-two times in his book entitled *A New*

Earth. [These people are comfortable talking about God, Jesus, heaven, salvation, the spirit, eternity . . . but they are giving definitions outside of scripture.] Eckhart Tolle says, and I quote, "Of course we believe in the Bible; it's part of ancient wisdom. We revere the Bible"ⁱ

I am not sure what exactly he is revering, but I do know what he is reversing.

This is a quote from one of Eckhart's books,

*The truth is inseparable from who you are. The very being that you are is truth. Jesus tried to convey that when he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." These words uttered by Jesus are one of the most profound and direct pointers to the truth if understood correctly; if misinterpreted they could become a great obstacle.*ⁱⁱ

What he means by this is that Jesus, the enlightened man who found out how to connect with the Divine within, has pointed out that everyone is the way, the truth, and the life. The great obstacle is when we do not believe this, but instead believe that Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life. For the believer, this is the great bridge to heaven. For Eckhart, it is the great obstacle to self-realization.

By the way, Eckhart does not quote the rest of John 14:6 that says,

. . . No one comes to the Father except through Me.

However, ask him, along with Marianne Williamson and Rhonda Byrne, the author of *The Secret*, "Do you believe in Jesus?" and they will say, "Of course." But they have redefined Him.

Dig a little deeper to discover that (and I am summarizing from *A Course in Miracles*, taught by Marianne Williamson) the name "Jesus" is merely a symbol which can stand for any god or goddess that one can decide to pour into that name.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is a different Jesus entirely.

By the way, Erwin Lutzer, in the most recent manuscript that he sent to me this past week, made the point that the author of *A Course in Miracles*, which is now being taught in Protestant churches in

Europe and liberal churches in America, was not entirely written by its author, Helen Shookman. She claimed that it was the result of what is called “automatic writing” . . . writing by a spirit guide who takes over as someone lets themselves stop thinking and writes down what the spirit guide actually dictates. Helen Shookman openly claimed that she was not the author of the book but simply the scribe.^{iv}

Neal Walsch, also a guest of Oprah and comrade of all these others, wrote his best seller, entitled *Conversations with God*, also by way of automatic writing. In other words, information was granted to his subconscious mind by spirit guides; by the spirit world.

This sends me immediately to Paul’s warning to the believers living in Galatia as he wrote,

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel –

not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

(Galatians 1:6-9)

All of this boils down to what we believe about Jesus Christ. This is the reason the gospel can be boiled down to believing that Jesus Christ is “kurios” – Lord, literally deity. This is not believing that Jesus Christ is a principle of deity as Christian Science teaches, but a person; God the Son.

Christian Science is all the rage now as well. One man said, it is like Grape Nuts – which is neither grapes nor nuts. This false teaching is neither Christian nor Science. They believe that God is merely a curative principle – again, just some kind of force to tap into.

Salvation comes by believing that Jesus Christ is *the* personal, literal God and, as Paul goes on to add, by believing also that God the Father raised God the Son from the dead – personally, physically, not spiritually or mystically. Paul says in Romans 10:9 that these two things are part and parcel of salvation.

In other words, we cannot be saved apart from the gospel and we cannot be saved apart from the gospel of Christ.

I got a lengthy, rambling letter this week from someone who believed that I was in error for making too much of the deity of Christ. From what I have just read from Galatians and Romans, we cannot make too much of Christ’s deity. If anything, we are not making enough of it.

And is it ever amazing to discover that Christ happens to be the subject and theme of the great hymns in heaven?

In chapter 4 of Revelation, God the Father is worshiped as the sovereign, pre-existent Creator; in chapter 5, God the Son is worshiped as the Redeemer. And the singing, by the way, exalts many of the same attributes in God the Son as are exalted in God the Father.

One author wrote, “Only on earth is there any question about Jesus Christ’s identity and worth. In heaven they know who He is and what He is worth . . . only on earth is there confusion, perplexity and error.”^v

In heaven, however, there is clarity and magnificent worship and singing.

Jesus is Worthy

Now, if you have been with me in this series on Revelation chapters 4 and 5, following the first two hymns of heaven in chapter 4, we arrived at chapter 5 to discover John the apostle weeping (Revelation 5:4). He is weeping because no one is capable of opening the scroll with seven seals.

John’s audience would know that a seven-sealed scroll was a title deed or a last will and testament. No one was worthy to claim the title deed of earth and the universe; no one was capable and powerful enough to carry out the last will and testament, as it were, of God the Father.

However, there was One – the One who centuries earlier had come to earth to do the will of His Father. In verse 5 of chapter 5, John is told to stop weeping because Jesus Christ, equally omniscient and omnipresent and omnipotent – the One described in chapter 1 as pre-existent and sovereign – is the One who is able to fulfill the will of the Father and powerful enough to see it accomplished.

By the way, God evidently knows His will for the future, symbolized by this scroll, and Jesus Christ is there to receive it.

The open theists must stumble at this in their belief that God is learning as He goes along; that He is figuring things out as mankind responds to Him. But here, John, in 95 AD, is seeing the will of God

written in a scroll – events that are going to take place more than 2,000 years later are already confirmed. To God, the future is as clear as the past.

John sees God’s Son – the Lion; the One who descended from the royal tribe of Judah; the One who is both the descendant of David and pre-existent – the root of David; the only One who has conquered death and the grave (Revelation 5:5) – stepping forward to receive the confirmed, decreed will of the Triune God.

To try to find the will of God through mediums and spirit guides and the occult world is a dangerous pursuit. To listen to the teachings of authors like Rhonda Byrne and Marianne Williamson and Helen Shookman and Eckhart Tolle is to play with fire.

Since the heart of every human knows there is life after death; there is something out there; there is a spirit world that is just as alive as this physical world, everyone wants a clue; a sign; a secret key to unlock it all.

If all forms of spiritism – channeled spirit guides, automatic writing, séances, and the like – were fakery and sleight of hand, God would not have forbidden His people from dabbling in it.

A gentleman in our church gave me a recent article from the Wall Street Journal that recorded the ongoing uproar over the firing of a trial court judge in the Philippines because he admitted to receiving advice and counsel from three invisible elves.

This sounds strange to us, but it is not in this culture in which elves are part of the spirit world and belief in their power dates all the way back to the sixteenth century. People make pilgrimages to places of supposed sightings.

This judge claims to have been able to perceive these three elves in 1986. Before he was fired – only recently – he would sometimes enter a trance in his chambers and write his rulings.

The three elves are known as Angel, who is a neutral force, Armand, who is a benign influence, and Luis, whom this judge describes as the king of kings.^{vi}

Ladies and gentlemen, Satan, the angel of light, is alive and well. He and his dark kingdom have the ability to deliver to open minds and hearts information about the past and events of the present, as well as clues about things that just might happen in the future. This deceives many into thinking they have tapped into something good.

This is the way the channeler can come up with the nickname of your deceased uncle. The demonic

world can communicate through their own network what just happened in New York and Australia. They see the vision boards of women who follow Rhonda Byrne and *The Secret*, maneuvering for many whatever they can so that some of it comes true.

There is a reason that demonized people in the New Testament immediately knew who Christ was and later, the apostle Paul, without ever having had an introduction.

They knew.

They do not know any more of the future than you or I – for Satan and his demons are not omniscient. However, they can read the times and watch humanity at work and play with incredible skill.

Several years ago, I headed to Japan to visit some of our church’s global staff. By the way, what a privilege to teach the son of that family now at Shepherds Seminary – Billy Petite plans to return to Japan after graduating and pastor the church planted by his grandfather.

Before I left for Japan, I went to the store to buy some board games to take with me for the family. I was surprised to see Ouija boards for sale as a game, no less. You should know that the makers of the Ouija board went to court in 1922, claiming tax-exempt status for the sale of their boards because of its religious connections. I was able to read a newspaper article, dated June 6, 1922, in which they ended up arguing before the Supreme Court that the Ouija board was not a game, but a form of amateur medium-ship which involved “automation and the subconscious mind” and was therefore a spiritual exercise, and not taxable. They lost in court, and the boards have been sold ever since as a game.

My friend if you have an Ouija board, throw it away. If you read the tarot cards for fun, throw them away. If you read the horoscope in the newspapers, like millions of other Americans, just to see if any of it will pan out, stop. If you are calling 1-900-psychic, like millions of other Americans wandering and winding on their way to eternal judgment, stop. Stop flirting with a kingdom that is real and dangerous.

God does not warn us because these things are innocent. Just read again II Kings chapter 1 sometime. God does not forbid the activities of mediums and sorcerers and spiritists and astrologers because they are silly, or just for fun, or not really true, or they do not really work. He warns us because they are a doorway that opens the heart and mind to the deceiver – the angel of light; to the false teacher,

the medium, the channeler, the erudite and articulate guest on TV talk shows who tells that we can create our own destiny; that we are divine; that our will can move the universe.

For the believer,

- there is only One whose will we seek;
- there is only One to whom we pray;
- there is only One on whom we meditate;
- there is only One who controls the universe;
- there is only One who has revealed the future in the truth of scripture that we pursue;
- there is only One whose will we desire to follow.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah deal with the spiritual wanderings of his own people as he wrote this warning,

When they say to you, “Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter,” should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no [light].

. . . And they will be thrust into thick darkness.

(Isaiah 8:19-22)

This is the future! It is unrolling in a scroll held not by a principle of deity; not by a symbol of some god or goddess, but by the Lamb of God – the risen, majestic, powerful, Son of God.

In this inspired tour of heaven, Christ alone is the One worthy of performing the will of His Father – unleashing the wrath of God on earth and riding to victory with the redeemed and setting up the throne of David in Jerusalem and inaugurating the Kingdom era.

So John stops weeping as he sees Jesus Christ take the scroll.

Ode to Jesus

Now notice Revelation 5:8a.

And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders [which represent the church] fell down before the Lamb . . .

John is seeing that which is in your future and mine. We are here in this scene, represented by the

elders – crowned, wearing white robes, and, as we will see, called to rule and reign as priests before God.

People often wonder what we will do when we first see Christ. We do not need to wonder – this text tells us. We will fall at His feet.

John MacArthur shared, in a session I attended some time ago, about a conversation with a well-known leader. This leader, who is a pastor in California, told MacArthur that one morning he was shaving and Jesus Christ appeared to him. He then asked John, “Do you believe me – that Jesus Christ appeared to me?”

MacArthur asked, “Did you keep shaving?”

“Yes, I did.”

MacArthur responded, “Then it wasn’t Jesus . . . if it had been, you would have fallen on your face before Him [shaving cream and all].”^{vii}

I am really sorry if this ruins one of your favorite songs – the Bible often does that when it is consulted – but you do not need to only imagine. When you first enter the presence of Christ, you will not dance before Jesus or not be able to speak at all; furthermore, you will not hug Him, give Him a high five, or give God a hand with polite applause. And you will not be silent – because a great hymn is about to erupt in that great symphony hall like we have never heard before.

Before we look at the lyrics, notice what the elders, representing the church, are holding. Revelation 5:8b tells us they are,

. . . each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense . . .

The grammar in this verse makes it unlikely that the four creatures are holding harps or bowls of incense; in fact, it seems that they do not sing until the final stanza of the hymn we are about to hear.^{viii}

You might say, “I knew it! We’re all gonna have to play harps in heaven.”

This is the verse that gives people the idea that we are going to sit on a cloud and play a harp forever.

Some of you would not mind if everyone was playing the guitar or trumpet; in fact, some of you would be *really* happy if they all had banjos in their hands – heaven knows good music.

While these are literal harps and bowls, they serve a symbolic purpose. We are given some help in the last part of Revelation 5:8 by being told the symbolic nature of the golden bowls of incense. Notice that it tells us,

... which are the prayers of the saints.

Roman Catholic interpreters would use this verse to prove that saints in heaven are serving today as mediators of prayers voiced on earth – so we should be praying to the saints.

Protestant author Randy Alcorn, in his book entitled *Heaven*, argues that saints in heaven are praying for people on earth.

Both views miss, first of all, the clear teaching that there is only one mediator in heaven – as Paul wrote to Timothy – and that,

... mediator ... [is] Christ Jesus (I Timothy 2:5)

Furthermore, this is not a picture of saints in heaven praying for saints on earth. This is a picture of the future, when the church is in heaven with Christ, immediately preceding the beginning of the tribulation.

John is not implying in this verse that saints in heaven are conveying to God the prayers of believers on earth, as Roman Catholicism teaches, or that saints in heaven are involved in praying on behalf of the saints below, as some Protestant believers suggest. This is not a picture of life here and now. This is a picture of the future.

The prayers of the saints at this stage in history should be understood as appeals to God for the coming of Messiah's reign – the literal culmination of the way Christ taught us to pray on earth, "Thy kingdom come – Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."^{ix}

Imagine the perspective we will have and the ability to pray that particular prayer then.

What about the harps? Well, we are not told what they represent – as we are the bowls of incense. However, in the Old Testament harps were often associated with prophecy. The prophet Samuel prophesied to the sound of harps (I Samuel 10:5); Elisha called for a harpist before prophesying (II Kings 3:15).

I agree with one author who said that taken together, harps and bowls indicate that all that the prophets ever prophesied and all the prayers that God's children ever prayed are finally and ultimately going to be fulfilled!^x

Donald Grey Barnhouse, a former pastor and author, provoked my thinking when he wrote, "There are four things that are out of place in the universe; four things not yet in their final place. Christ, who belongs on David's throne reigning; Israel, who belongs in the land promised to her; Satan and his demons, who belong in hell; the church, who belongs in heaven."^{xi}

It is no wonder there is such incredible worship – events are moving that will put everything in its rightful place.

Notice Revelation 5:9a.

And they sang a new song . . .

Stop at this point. Why sing a new song? Because nothing else will quite do.

The Greek word for "new" (καινην) is a word that refers to something better than the old; something of superior value.^{xii}

Revelation is a book of new things. We have been given a new name (2:17; 3:12); we will occupy a new Jerusalem (3:12; 21:2); there are new heavens and a new earth (21:1); and to sort of sum it all up, God says in Revelation 21:5, "I make all things new."^{xiii}

- Are you abused and mistreated? God is going to make everything just.
- Are you suffering and afflicted? God is going to make everything right.
- Are you tired of temptation and sin? God is going to make everything clean and perfected.
- Are you tired of the drudgery and of life? God is going to make everything fresh and new.

Are you getting old? I am! I turn fifty this month. Fifty. That is ridiculous. I know people in their fifties – they are old people. When I began pastoring Colonial Baptist Church, I was twenty-eight and longed to turn thirty so that I could have some age. Then I was even happy to turn forty. I am not happy anymore.

Guess what I got in the mail this week? I got a letter inviting me to join the AARP. Who told?

Actually, I did not know what the AARP was, but everyone in the brochure had gray hair and looked extremely happy. So I googled online and found out it was an organization for people fifty and up. They have their own magazine – *AARP The Magazine* has the largest magazine circulation in the world. I do not care. I am still forty-nine!

Are you getting old? I am! God is going to make everything – including us – brand new.

And they sang a new song . . .

“A new song” – the Greek word for “song” (ὠδή) gives us our English word “ode,” which is a lyrical poem intended to be sung. We recognize this word in the classical world of music.

In Beethoven’s 9th symphony, he included a poem entitled “Ode to Joy”. In fact, the 9th symphony is called the “Symphony of Joy” because of its joyful lyrics. The poem ends with these powerful lyrics, sung in this magnificent symphony:

*One sees the banners of joy in the wind,
Through the opening of burst coffins
One sees her standing in the chorus of angels.
Endure courageously, millions!
Endure for the better world!
There above the starry canopy
A great God will reward.^{xiv}*

Actually, by the time Beethoven finished this symphony, he was deaf – he never heard one note when it debuted with him conducting. After the second movement, the night it was first performed, the people jumped to their feet and began to cheer. Beethoven was simply disturbed that his orchestra was not preparing for the third movement and kept motioning for them to prepare. Finally, one of the members pointed and he turned around to see the audience cheering while members of the orchestra wept. The Ode to Joy was and still is magnificent music.

This hymn in Revelation 5 is the redeemed singing an ode to Jesus – and it is incredible. It begins in verse 9 with the words,

. . . Worthy are you . . .

John’s audience would have goose bumps at this first phrase.

Domitian, the cruel Roman emperor was beginning to persecute the church; it was Domitian who exiled John to the island of Patmos. Whenever there was a lavish state banquet or a festival, the crowd rose when Domitian entered and they chanted these same words, “Worthy are you . . . worthy are you.”^{xv}

What a thrilling moment as this orchestra plays and this choir sings and John hears these opening words to the Emperor of Heaven – the true and living King of Kings.

In John’s day the church was small, isolated, struggling, and even sinful. What would her future be? Would she triumph? Would she even grow? Would persecution and sin extinguish the spreading flame of Christianity?^{xvi}

This is final proof – the church remained alive and well.

The promise of Jesus Christ that the gates of Hades would not overwhelm the church had indeed come true (Matthew 16:18).

Notice new lyrics now in Revelation 5:9b.

. . . for you were slain . . .

The word used for “slain” refers to a death of violence and mercilessness. It was not an accident – Jesus’ death was intentional.

Without His death there is no gospel (I Corinthians 15).

Christ’s death is also redemptive. Notice the next phrase in Revelation 5:9c,

. . . and by your blood you purchased people for God . . .

The word for “purchased” was used in John’s day for buying slaves and then setting them free. Christ’s death set us free from slavery to sin and enslavement in an eternal hell.

His death is not only intentional and redemptive, but universal. I did not say universalism, which is the belief that everyone gets into heaven no matter what they believe. I said universal. That is, the effects of the atonement of Christ reach around the world.

Notice in the middle of Revelation 5:9,

- The redeemed are from every **tribe** – this refers to the same family line or clan;
- The redeemed are from every **language** or tongue – the word is “glossa” (γλῶσσα), which refers to every group distinguished by a language;
- The redeemed are from every **people** – a word that refers to race;
- The redeemed are from every **nation** – the word is “ethnos” (ἔθνος) and refers to an ethnic body of people united by culture and common tradition.^{xvii}

Can you imagine John’s heart pounding with amazement and joy as he discovers the atoning work of Christ has reached around the world?

Three benefits to Christ's cross work are sung of next:

1. First, the church is given **royal position** – we have been made a kingdom, John wrote in Revelation 5:10a.
2. Secondly, we are given an **eternal priesthood** – as priests we will have ongoing immediate access to our Lord.
3. Thirdly, we are given a **future promise** – still future to this choir of redeemed ones. Notice Revelation 5:10b,

. . . and they shall reign on the earth.

This is an indisputable reference to the coming kingdom on earth. We will study more on this later.

Ladies and gentlemen, this inspired Ode to Joy – which we could call an ode to Jesus Christ – is really a song about the power of the cross work of Jesus Christ who was slain and who ransomed a people for God.

Conclusion

Marianne Williamson has now taught *A Course in Miracles* on Oprah's network to millions of people. This is what *A Course in Miracles* says about the crucified Lord, and I quote, "A slain Christ has no meaning. The only message of the crucifixion is that you can overcome the cross. Do not make the pathetic error of clinging to the old rugged cross."^{xviii}

"A slain Christ has no meaning"? My friend, a slain Christ has eternal meaning. According to this passage, in heaven we are still going to be singing about it.

"Don't make the pathetic error of clinging to the old rugged cross"? Don't make the pathetic error of *ignoring* the old rugged cross!

The apostle Paul said,

. . . God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . (Galatians 6:14 KJV)

If you ignore the crucified Savior and reject the cross of Jesus Christ, you will die in your sins without hope forever.

If you accept the crucified Savior and believe in the death of Jesus Christ for your sins and His burial and His resurrection, you will live in the new heaven and the new earth forever.

Ignore it and die in your sins and suffer the consequences forever.

Believe it and live unto Christ in the coming kingdom forever and forever.

ⁱ Erwin Lutzer, sermon "The Lie," (Apr. 20, 2008).

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v David J. MacLeod, "The Adoration of God the Redeemer," Bibliotheca Sacra, (Oct/Dec 2007), p. 454.

^{vi} Wall Street Journal (Sept. 17, 2007), p. A1.

^{vii} Steven J. Lawson, Heaven Help Us (NavPress, 1995), p. 88.

^{viii} MacLeod, p. 458.

^{ix} Ibid., p. 459.

^x John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1999), p. 171.

^{xi} Ibid., p. 170.

^{xii} Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1992), p. 399.

^{xiii} William Barclay, The Revelation of John: Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1976), p. 176.

^{xiv} http://www.en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ode_to_Joy.

^{xv} MacLeod, p. 461.

^{xvi} MacArthur, p. 172.

^{xvii} MacLeod, p. 461.

^{xviii} Lutzer.