

THE GOODNESS OF HEAVEN

THE GOODNESS OF GOD 7

Goodness abounds in heaven, and we can join with it.



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Goodness of Heaven

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The Goodness of God 7
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The Goodness of Heaven

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The Goodness of Heaven

Welcome to *The Goodness of Heaven*

Certainly, if we're trying to understand the goodness of God, we should take a look at things in heaven.

This might seem an impossible task. However, the Scriptures offer glimpses into this unseen realm, and in these we can see the goodness of heaven at work. What we see in the worship of God in heaven, and in other activities there, can guide us, not only in our worship, but in understanding the nature of divine goodness, and in working to realize more of that goodness in the land of the living.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Treasures in Heaven

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6.19-21

What’s so good about it?

Since Christians have been created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph. 2.10), and we are to be a people zealous, ready for, and maintaining all manner of good works (Tit. 2.14; 3.8, 14), it behooves us to understand as much as we can about good works and how we may perform them. We long to see God’s goodness in the land of the living, and God intends much of that goodness to come to light through us, His people.

We began this study by looking at God Himself, and we saw that His goodness consists, among many other things, of the unity, holiness, and harmony He enjoys within Himself, and in the order, creativity, and love He expresses toward and within created things. We have seen examples of God’s goodness in creation and culture, the Law of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In all this quest to understand God’s goodness, we have been guided by the Word of God, and our goal has been to learn how we may bring more of God’s goodness to light in the land of the living, and thus fulfill the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 14.12).

We are thus eager to learn about God’s goodness from as many sources as the Scriptures present. One of these is surely the vision of heaven which we may discover in the Bible. Granted, we see only glimpses of the glory and goodness to be discovered there; but Jesus explained that these glimpses witness to a *treasure* which should command the devotion of our heart. Surely, that sounds like something good?

But I wonder. On occasion, I have asked groups of believers to raise their hand if they want to go to heaven. Of course, everyone does. Then I’ve asked them to raise their hand if they want to go to heaven *today*. The number of raised hands typically diminishes. Now I understand that there may be many good and selfless reasons why people do not want to go to heaven right now. But I think it’s possible, if not likely, that our vision of heaven is such that we see it as the better of two alternatives, that is, compared to hell, rather than as the best thing we could realize prior to the new heavens and new earth.

The simple fact is that Jesus said there are *treasures* in heaven, and treasures are good. We should try to understand what Jesus had in mind. What might those treasures in heaven be?

Heavenly treasures

Because we are to treasure them, they must have some form we can observe or measure, something we can delight and invest in which appeals to the longings of our heart. Treasures on earth we can count, spend, invest, accumulate, and put to various uses; yet such treasures have temporal and temporary value only. The treasures of heaven are eternal, unchanging, undiminished, holy, radiant, majestic, and glorious. Jesus instructs us to bank on *these* treasures, to find in them our greatest goodness, and a goodness to enrich all our good works in this life.

In heaven, Christ reigns at the right hand of God, in the fullness of His beauty, goodness, and truth, radiant and resplendent in glory, majesty, and power. In heaven, Christ’s Kingdom exists in perfect righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

In heaven, saints and angels gather to worship the Lord in holiness and unbounded joy, with unceasing music, amid sights and sounds and smells of the most majestic and glorious kind.

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In heaven, departed saints intercede for us, and add to the overall beauty and splendor of the heavenly court by their individual luster. Among them grace, praise, fellowship, joy, and peace abound. There the great variety of individual gifts and callings, which the Spirit lavishes upon the Church, are fused in perfect unity, holiness, and harmony to celebrate and exalt our King and God.

In heaven a fixed order of glory, praise, and rejoicing continues without interruption or corruption. The boundless creativity of innumerable saints produces a never-ending fountain of beauty and goodness. All present in that glorious heavenly court bask and prosper in the infinite love of God, and they unite in love to love and serve Him without ceasing.

Making deposits

Can you see this? Is this real to you, in your mind and heart? Do you find this vision attractive? Appealing? So desirable that you can say with the apostle Paul, “to die *is* gain” (Phil. 1.21)? Are you prepared to embrace the thought that you are even now seated there with Christ, and thus invited to participate in the glory and goodness of this eternal realm (Eph. 2.6)?

Can you focus on this, enumerate and enjoy the individual features of glory abounding in this domain? Let these your treasure be, and your heart, delighting in them, will shape your soul for all manner of good pursuits in the here and now.

We have a treasure in heaven! And we can begin making additional deposits into this eternal treasury, by setting our minds on the things that are above, where Christ is seated in heavenly places, and entering into the fellowship of that glorious cloud of witnesses, so that the goodness they know in holy perfection we may experience increasingly, if only imperfectly (Col. 3.1-3; Heb. 12.1).

By entering the goodness of heaven and investing in the treasure the Lord has for us there, we can improve in our calling to good works here and now. We bring heaven’s goodness to earth here and now by depositing attention, devotion, and active participation in that life with Christ that we possess there and then. By discovering and sharing in the goodness of heaven, we become better fitted to realize the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

For reflection

1. I sometimes get the feeling that Christians think heaven is a kind of boring place. Why do you suppose that’s so? Does such a view of heaven betoken a *correct* view? Explain.
2. What do you think might be involved in making deposits in our heavenly treasure? Why should we do this?
3. How can Christians encourage one another to live in the there and then, here and now?

Next steps – Preparation: How do you think about heaven? How complete is your vision of this glorious, unseen realm? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

2 Around the Throne

Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. Revelation 4.4-6

The power of prepositions

When I used to teach the Biblical languages, I would caution students not to sell prepositions short. Prepositions are words that indicate direction or position of one thing in relationship to something else. They're typically short words, and we use them all the time. So it might be easy to overlook the prepositions of a text and pay more attention to the verbs and nouns.

But prepositions are very important; they set the stage. Prepositional phrases can cause a sentence or a paragraph to become more vivid, especially when, as in our text, they are piled on in relation to a common subject. Listen to all the prepositions in these three verses: *around, on, in, on, from, before, before, in the midst of, around in, in*. There are only 87 words in those three verses, and more than 10% of them are prepositions! The author is using these prepositions to create an image of the throne room of God and, by projection, of the larger landscape of heaven itself. He uses these prepositions to position God on His throne in the center of things so wonderful and mysterious that they overwhelm us with His glory as we try to envision them.

As John was enabled by the Spirit to part the veil separating time from eternity, he saw (vv. 2, 3) “a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne. And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and *there was* a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.” What first met John’s eyes was this dazzling vision of radiant colors, emanating from and draping a central throne where “One” sat Who seemed the very embodiment of brilliant light and power.

The centrality of the throne

Then, in verses 4-6, the prepositions get to work to help us understand how all of heaven unites around this central figure. All that is glorious and mysterious and wondrous, all that we shall one day be part of, is oriented by prepositions in relation to the throne of God, creating a unity of glory that makes heaven a very good place to be, indeed.

From the throne of God, and *within* an emerald green rainbow, light and life radiate, ominous threats of judgment and dazzling flashes of illuminating power explode, and voices defining, instructing, and upholding all things proceed continuously.

Around the throne saints, represented by the elders of the Old Testament tribes and New Testament apostles, rule with God in His Kingdom, clothed in the bright whiteness of holy light, gold crowns shimmering on their heads.

Before the throne seven lamps of fire – indicating the sevenfold Spirit of God (cf. Is. 11.2) – flicker with the warmth and life they receive and disseminate from the throne.

Before the throne a sea of glass reflects all this brilliance and radiance, so that everything around is bathed in glorious, shimmering light.

In the midst of the throne strange creatures, representing creation in its restored potential, as well as prophetic mysteries yet to be disclosed, look out in all directions through a multitude of eyes to take in the beauty, grandeur, and majesty of their surroundings.

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In heaven all beauty and radiance and glory and mystery and sustaining power and light emanate from the throne of God; and all attention, wonder, adoration, celebration, and service are directed back to the throne. Everything and everyone are united before the throne of our holy God.

Unity in heaven

In heaven, where God dwells with angels and departed saints, everything cries, “Glory!” (Ps. 29.9). Everything is oriented to God. He is the source and focal point of everything. By His light and life, He gives form and color and vibrancy to everything around Him, and everything around Him acknowledges its indebtedness to and its fullest joy and purpose in Him. He draws out glorious music and celebratory song. He causes saints to fall on their knees. He dispatches angels to carry out earth-bound tasks. He receives praise and enlivens every creature before, around, and in the midst of Him with eternal life and glory.

In heaven, nothing distracts from the centrality of God. There are no other priorities than the glory of God, known and expressed; no other agendas than being in the presence of God; no other joys than being immersed in the light and life of God; and no other thought than that this place and these sights and sounds and this holy experience is truly and undeniably *good*.

When all our works are thus united – coming *from* God, *by* His Word and Spirit, *before* His face, *in* His presence, *around* all the people we see each day, and *unto* God’s glory alone – they will be truly good as well.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose God revealed these wondrous details about heaven to the apostle John?
2. As God’s Kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven, how do scenes such as this teach us to think about our own lives?
3. How can we make sure that all our words and deeds are united by our devotion to God and Christ?

Next steps – Transformation: How can you pray the Lord’s Prayer so that you seek the Kingdom with greater clarity in your Personal Mission Field?

3 On Earth as in Heaven

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!" Revelation 4.8

The living creatures

Of all the strange images in the book of Revelation, that of the four living creatures in the midst of and around the throne of God is surely one of the strangest. What are these creatures? What do they represent? And what can we learn from them about the good works for which we have been redeemed?

The living creatures mentioned here perhaps represent all living creatures. This is suggested by the response of the elders, who represent all the departed saints, to the witness of the creatures ("created all things", v. 9). These creatures are in heaven as a kind of first fruit of creation redeemed and restored, as it shall be in the new heavens and new earth. In heaven, all creation rejoices and participates in, and celebrates the holiness of God. Heaven is an intermediary destination for departed saints, who will only be fully and completely glorified in the new heavens and new earth. It is not unreasonable to suppose that some tokens of the whole creation, which will be similarly restored, should be in heaven as well.

The living creatures are full of eyes, so that they see clearly, and we can therefore trust their witness. They have six wings because they aspire and strain to rise above the merely mundane to that which is above and heavenly. The six wings remind us of the six wings of certain angels, and witness to the spiritual nature of all creation (Is. 6.2; cf. Ezek. 1.4-11).

These creatures thus demonstrate the purpose of all created things, and they teach us how to observe the creation around us, and how to respond to and even use it. They show us that we must honor the holiness of God in all we do (cf. Ps. 19.1-4).

These living creatures testify of what they see and that to which they aspire, even the holy, sovereign, eternal Lord and God, Who is altogether holy, almighty, and eternal. If the creation as it exists in heaven bears such witness to the holiness of God, should we not expect the creation here below to do so as well?

Their testimony

The creation, in heaven and on earth, witnesses continually to God (cf. Rom. 1.18-20; Ps. 145.10-12). He has created all things so that they "see" Him in His glory and bear witness to His holiness, sovereignty, and eternity, each in its own unique "voice".

God intends the creation to direct our thoughts and aspirations heavenward, toward the unseen realm where Christ rules with the Father and the Spirit in radiant glory, light, majesty, praise, holiness, and honor. If we, like the creation, can see into this realm, we will behold the glory and holiness of God, and give witness to these in our own callings, as the creation does in its.

God bears witness to Himself in all created things, that they might induce us to humble ourselves before Him, cast ourselves in utter and complete dependence upon Him, and glorify and serve Him in every aspect of our lives, as in heaven, so on earth.

And bring His goodness to light in holy works of love.

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On earth as in heaven

Jesus taught us to pray that the Kingdom of God, as it exists in heaven, would become real and visible on earth as well (Matt. 6.10). We must pray like this daily. But praying is not enough. We must give ourselves to understanding the nature and operation of the heavenly Kingdom, so that we may emulate and advance it here on earth, in every aspect of our daily lives.

The creation in heaven celebrates and thus advances the holiness of God, as does the creation here on earth. Our duty is to discover the glory and holiness of God in the things He has made (Prov. 25.2), and to understand from this, in the light of God's Word, how we may bring holiness to completion in the fear of God through good works in our own callings (2 Cor. 7.1).

As we meditate on the heavenly court and contemplate the unseen landscape of that eternal and glorious realm, we discover that all creatures, as many as are there, see God clearly and proclaim His glory and holiness. While the creation here below currently groans and travails under a burden of sin, brokenness, and futility (Rom. 8.20-22), it nevertheless declares the glory of God and witnesses to His holiness.

And it teaches us that we must do the same.

The presence of sin in the world may be great and increasing, and we may be weak and limited in our ability to stem this rising tide. But if the groaning and travailing creation can bear witness to God – refracting as it does the creation that already exists in heaven – then we must do so as well. Those who have preceded us in heaven are holy, and they acknowledge the holiness of Him Who has created all things, including us. We can do no other in bringing the reign of heaven to reality and visibility on earth than to pursue holiness in the fear of God, and thus fulfill God's purpose for our lives.

For reflection

1. Can you give some examples of how the creation here below, following the example of the creation in heaven, testifies to the holiness of God?
2. Why is holiness so important to the progress of God's Kingdom on earth?
3. What are the greatest obstacles keeping us from bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God? How can we overcome these?

Next steps – Preparation: How might you begin to pay more attention to the message of creation concerning the holiness of God? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

4 All Together Now

*Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying:
“You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals;
For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
And have made us kings and priests to our God;
And we shall reign on the earth.”* Revelation 5.8-10

Under new management

With the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the subsequent outpouring of His Spirit, the world and everything in it came under new management.

Not that it wasn't always under this administration, but now that eternal regime is more personally and pointedly involved in renewing all aspects of the world order. The old regime has been sacked and sent away in chains (Matt. 12.22-29; Col. 2.13-15), and the old Proprietor has resumed hands-on control, and He is busily bringing order, beauty, goodness, freedom, harmony, uprightness, and life to all things.

The age of darkness, destruction, death, and decay is over. The light of eternal truth, hope, and joy has dawned, and it is everywhere putting the old regime to flight (1 Jn. 2.8). An administration of lies, deceit, disillusionment, disappointment, despair, and death – where the favored few, under the influence of evil spiritual forces, trampled the untold multitudes – is being replaced by a worldwide ecosystem of truth, grace, and peace, where all people and things can flourish in the fullness of life. A realm of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit is everywhere bringing newness to all things.

This new dispensation – economy or administration – was announced by the apostles, calling all those who know the salvation of the Lord to join hands in the work of revival, renewal, and restoration (cf. Heb. 2.3-9; Eph. 1.4-14; 1 Jn. 2.1-16). Its beginnings were first glimpsed in John's vision in Revelation 5.8-10, where the response of the heavenly hosts teaches us just how powerful this new regime is to effect a symphony and chorus of glorious harmony involving faithful servants throughout all of heaven and earth.

Let's take a closer look.

What's going on here?

John has been granted a vision into matters eternal. Lifted by the Spirit into the very court of heaven, he is caught up in the majesty and mystery, the beauty and blessedness, and the safety and solidity which is the presence of the living God (Rev. 4). What can all this mean?

Suddenly, “a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals” is produced. An angel cries in a voice filled with anticipation, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?” (Rev. 5.1, 2) No one in heaven is competent for so great a task.

John, sensing this is something momentous, as if this scroll, this divine decree, portends some new mystery, begins to weep, “because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it.”

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But his tears are wiped away by the announcement that “a Lamb as though it had been slain”, a Lamb accompanied by the Spirit of the living God, is appointed a seat on God’s throne and given the wondrous scroll.

The constitution of the new world order is placed in the hands of the one Being Who is worthy and able to open the scroll, seal by seal, and begin the implementation of the Kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven. The Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world, now prepares to unfold a new order of divine goodness and glory in and through all that God has made.

No wonder they’re rejoicing

No sooner is the Lamb vested with the authority to rule and administer all things in heaven and on earth, than all heaven erupts in a glorious symphony of harps, a boisterous chorus of praise, and a rich offering of sweet incense. The Church in glory, accompanied by all creation, sings a new song of praise to the Lamb, acknowledging His worthiness, celebrating His work of redemption, and accepting their place as co-regents of the new order with Him.

Just as suddenly, myriads of angels break out in joyful song, until at last “every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them” are heard saying, “Blessing and honor and glory and power *be* to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!” (Rev. 5.13)

For with the enthronement of the Lamb, the Light of the world has come. The Bread of life is being distributed through the Spirit of God. The Head of the Church is directing His nation of kings and priests in a restoration project that is making all things new; and the uncountable, daily good works of the innumerable multitude of the people of God work as salt, light, and leaven to advance the rule of King Jesus on earth as it is in heaven.

The heavenly hosts show us the kind of worldwide harmony of God’s goodness that can arise in each of our souls, all our churches, every community and nation, through all aspects of social and cultural life as, all together now, the people of God on earth, set their minds on the heavenly realm (Col. 3.1-3) for guidance in bringing the goodness of God to light in the land of the living.

For reflection

1. What does Jesus mean by teaching us to pray that the Kingdom of God would come on earth as it is in heaven?
2. How much a part of your own spiritual life does contemplating things in heaven play? How could you improve in this?
3. Why do you suppose more Christians aren’t active in seeking the goodness of God?

Next steps – Transformation: What will you do to begin seeing more of Christ’s Kingdom and goodness coming to light in your sphere of being and influence?

5 Eyes on the Skies and the Prize

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." 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. Revelation 6.1, 2

Out of control?

To many people, the world can seem to be out of control. Things happen – whether natural, as in disasters, or human, as in wars and terror attacks – that make no sense. Nothing can be done about them but to endure or resist them, often at great cost. These efforts, too, can seem senseless and unfruitful, like Sisyphus, pushing his stone interminably up the mountain, only to have it roll back on him time after time (Camus).

People work hard all their lives, then watch their retirement funds evaporate in a collapse of the market. Folks lose jobs, health, or loved ones, and end up looking to heaven and asking, "Why?"

People succumb to bad habits; suffer the consequences of poor choices or hasty decisions; and end up in situations over which they have no control, and which threaten their wellbeing in a variety of ways.

The world seems out of control, and as the process continues, wickedness, evil, fear, uncertainty, apathy, and sadness increase, while good people, who might be able to do something about this, are nowhere to be found.

At some point in every generation, people have expressed this feeling of a loss of order, direction, meaning, and purpose to life. William Butler Yeats captured the futility and fear of those who see the world this way in his 1919 poem, "The Second Coming". Here is the opening stanza:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

But is it so? Is the world out of control? Or is what we're seeing merely the tangled underside of a tapestry of beauty and order?

As in heaven

The book of Revelation was given to the apostle John to assure the people of God that, as messy, horrible, scary, and ugly a place as the world can be, the events of history do not happen in random, disorderly ways, and to call them to faithfulness in following King Jesus.

Through a series of visions, John was shown the unfolding of historical events from his day to the return of Christ as if he were looking at the various facets of a single jewel.

Yes, the picture isn't pretty: Wars and famines. Earthquakes and immorality. Power-grabs and oppression. Strange natural and supernatural events that trouble the world. The history of the human race and the whole of creation expresses the spiritual infection of sin which pervades and corrupts everything – rivers and seas, fish and fowl, kings and paupers, commerce and community.

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Human beings aren't entirely to blame. Spiritual forces of wickedness, defeated and scattered by the work of Jesus Christ, yet retain power within the cosmos, and they are determined to use that power to wreck the divine order and, hopefully, force Jesus from His glorious throne.

But as these events unfold, in *every generation* as they unfold, God wants His people to know that all of this is occurring in line with and according to the eternal decrees of God. And these events, as troubling as they can seem, are being administered from God's right hand by the Lamb of God, Who was slain from before the foundation of the world.

The unity, holiness, and harmony of the heavenly court command the events of history and the cosmos. Seals are unlocked, trumpets sound, and bowls of incense are poured out to show that there is order, divine order, to the madness of our temporal experience – an order which will be clear to all who look with the eye of faith. A beautiful and decipherable tapestry of grace upon grace is unfolding through the ages of time, and we must not mistake the knotted and tangled underneath for the real narrative.

Eyes on heaven, eyes on the prize

As we think about our existence amid this things-falling-apart generation, we must not despair, and we must not give in to the spiritual, moral, and cultural entropy we see on every hand. By setting our minds on the things that are above, where Christ is seated in heavenly places, we can discern His order for the ages – an order of surprising and comprehensive goodness – and we can continue in our daily lives and spheres of being and influence to pursue that *novus ordo seclorum* which is the Kingdom of God.

And as we do – eyes on the skies of heaven and the prize of Christ's ultimate victory – we will be used of God to carve out communities of order in the midst of the chaos of the time, where righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit display the true tapestry of divine goodness over and above the confusion and disorder of the world.

For reflection

1. Why does the world often seem to be out of control? How does feeling this way affect people?
2. Do you think most Christians are looking at the tapestry or the underside? How does this affect their calling to bring the goodness of God to light in the land of the living?
3. How can we keep our eyes on the skies and the prize more consistently? How can we help one another in this? What kind of order should we expect this to bring to our lives?

Next steps – Transformation: What will you do, beginning today, to focus more on the skies and the prize?

6 Beautiful Creativity

*Listen, O daughter,
Consider and incline your ear;
Forget your own people also, and your father's house;
So the King will greatly desire your beauty;
Because He is your Lord, worship Him.* Psalm 45:10, 11

Creators all

If I had a bucket list, I know at least one thing that would be on it.

I'd like to participate in a "Sing-It-Yourself *Messiah*." If you're not familiar with these events, thousands of people gather in a great symphony hall to sing *Messiah* together. A full orchestra and chorus lead, but each member of the audience has his own score and, as is appropriate, sings his or her part.

Imagine the joy of participating in this! You have your eyes focused up front, where an expert choir and orchestra, under the direction of a seemingly omniscient conductor, are producing the most glorious words and sounds to the glory and majesty and exaltation of God and Christ. Meanwhile, as this glorious celebration is going on, you're out in the audience with others, joining your skills and great aspirations with those of the experts on the stage.

The whole hall fills with glorious sounds as creators at every point on the spectrum of beauty and excellence chime in and join together to create an experience none will ever forget. Yeah, I'd like to do that.

Soon and very soon

And it won't be long before I do. Only the music will far exceed anything Handel or any of the great composers in this life could create. And the sounds of joyful people, in an infinitely varied chorus of beautiful praise, will fill, not some symphony hall constructed by human hands, but the very courts of heaven, and all the vast spiritual realm, and ultimately, all the new heaven and new earth.

In heaven, all who achieve that exalted place realize the full beauty for which they have been created, redeemed, sanctified, and finally, glorified. God greatly desires the full beauty of His Church to be with Him and partake of Him, which is what heaven is really all about. There all who believe are like Jesus; but they are also the fullest, most complete, and most beautiful realization of themselves, each unique, each with differing interests and abilities, and each uniting with everyone else into one glorious daughter of our heavenly Father.

Partaking of this glorious sing-it-yourself will be the great joy and privilege of all who believe, at any moment, even the next. "Soon and very soon", as the old spiritual reminds us, we could be instantly taken up in the heavenly realm, where creative good works of celebration pour forth continually; and there we will join our creativity with that vast, unnumbered host, in a sing-it-yourself that just won't quit.

Ready?

Suppose I was invited today to join a "Sing-It-Yourself *Messiah*." Well, that would be too bad, because I'm not ready. I don't have a score of *Messiah*, and I can't sing off my neighbor's because that's not the way it's done.

Moreover, I have practiced only a *few* of the many songs in *Messiah*. And I know my *part* in only one or two.

Clearly, I could be better prepared.

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More importantly, are we ready to join the sing-it-yourself heavenly choir? Are we studying the Score – the Bible – to understand the whole composition, find our place within it, and cultivate your creativity?

Do you practice daily your part in this composition – the Kingdom and covenant of God? When you show up in heaven, will it be clear to all that you have worked to prepare for the eternal beauty you have come to join?

We'll only be ready if, as our psalmists advise, we “forget” the things of this life and worship our Lord and Savior daily, in all we do. We have been seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 2.6). Heaven is our home, and not just then and there. We are citizens of a heavenly Kingdom from which the power of God flows to make all things new and beautiful in our lives, preparing us here and now for what there and then we will enjoy in full and brilliant, infinite creativity with all those whom Jesus has redeemed and saved.

We must hear His voice, speaking to us from His Word. We must look to the heavenly realm for those glimpses of true beauty that we aspire to realize in our daily lives. And we must work out our beautiful salvation daily, in fear and trembling, knowing that God Himself is at work within us, willing and doing according to His good pleasure (Phil. 2.12, 13).

And thus we may expect to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living – the Kingdom of God coming on earth as it is in heaven.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that every person is a *creator*? That is, that all of us have creative potential for bringing forth goodness and beauty in unique ways? Explain.
2. What hinders us from exercising more of our creative potential, and becoming more beautiful in the Lord?
3. How can corporate worship prepare us for the infinite creativity of our eternal worship in heaven?

Next steps – Conversation: The psalmists insist that each of us has been endowed with a certain beauty from God. In how many different ways is the Lord's beauty expressed in His people? Talk with some friends about this question.

7 You, You, You

*“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.”* Revelation 4.11

The pronouns are the key

Sometimes it's the most commonplace things that unlock the greatest mysteries and teachings of faith.

Take for example, pronouns. For most of us, pronouns are grammatical pointers. They point to an antecedent, which, to avoid tediousness, they represent. So “they” in that last sentence is a pronoun pointing back to “pronouns” in the previous sentence. Try reading those two sentences without the pronoun, and they sound ridiculous.

Pronouns thus perform a valuable grammatical purpose by providing alternate ways of referring to the same thing. They help us avoid monotony in writing or speaking.

In the Scriptures, however, pronouns are often used to point beyond an antecedent into the very soul and spiritual condition of a person. For example, quickly scan Ecclesiastes 2.1-10. In these verses Solomon catalogs his achievements, so that readers can understand the measure of his greatness. But the point of Ecclesiastes 2 is to vaunt Solomon's greatness before he spends the rest of the book showing how empty and vain such priorities are, when they assume the place of ultimate importance in our lives. Solomon's works became greater and greater, while his soul became meaner and meaner. He emphasized what was happening in him by piling on the use of first-person personal pronouns (“I, me, myself, etc.). In the first 10 verses alone are almost 40 first person pronouns! The Beatles might have been singing about Solomon in their *Let it Be* album cut, “I, Me, Mine.” In a chapter in which Solomon is telling us “all about me”, we must not miss the larger point which the pronouns make: What was all about Solomon was about a heart drifting from God.

It's a good idea to pay attention to how the Bible uses pronouns, especially when, as in Ecclesiastes 2, and the scenes of worship in heaven, the same pronoun – or some form of it – recurs over and over.

It's not about us

I identify five different worship scenes, or parts of worship scenes, in the book of Revelation. Each of these features a song in which the hosts of heaven unite their voices to worship God.

In these songs more than 25 different pronouns are used. Only three or four of these (by my count) refer to the various worshipers assembled around the heavenly throne. All the others, in one form or another, refer to God. In heaven, it seems, worship is all about “You, You, You.” And the interests and wellbeing of those who worship are *always* and *only* properly defined in terms of how these relate to God's purpose and plans.

As we look in on the worship activities of those in heaven, everything they say and do points us away from them to God and His holiness, eternality, worthiness, glory, honor, power, providence, redemption, exaltation, salvation, blessing, greatness, awesomeness, justice, truth, and judgment.

This, we learn, is what it means to love God – to get beyond yourself, and any sense of your worthiness or wellbeing, by becoming so obsessed with, absorbed by, and devoted to God that He commands all your affections, values, thinking, words, and gestures. When that is the case, your worship will never be about “I, Me, Mine”, but only and always about “You, You, You”.

The Goodness of Heaven

Learning to love

Since this is the way saints, angels, and all creation express love for God in heaven, we should seek to follow this example in doing good works of love here on earth. We can learn about the kind of love that issues in good works by contemplating carefully and long the worship of our heavenly brethren, and Him Whom they worship so fervently. The strength, selflessness, and creativity we need to love the way Jesus did begins by making sure our love for God is fixed and growing. The more clearly we see God and participate in Him, the more His grace will cause our souls to increase in the righteousness of Jesus, including His love.

In worship – corporate and personal – we both *express* the love we have for God, and we *exercise* that love unto greater strength for daily living. Listen to your own prayers and singing. Which pronouns dominate your worship? Is your worship focused only on what you want God to do for you? If so, you love yourself first, and God as a means to enhancing your wellbeing. If you love God truly and deeply, your interests will take a distant back seat to contemplating and exalting the God Who made and keeps and restores all things, and to seeking His Kingdom and righteousness above all else. His being and works, His purpose and will, and His precious and very great promises will fill your worship; and in that context, you will grow in love for Him and in the *capacity* to express His love and demonstrate His goodness to others.

We are surrounded by saints and angels fervently and continuously busy at the good work they love most of all – worshipping and serving the God Who redeemed and saved them. We will improve in showing the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living as we emulate their example.

For reflection

1. How much time do you spend contemplating heaven and what's going on there? Besides the book of Revelation, where else in Scripture would you look to flesh out a fuller vision of heaven? Be specific.
2. What are some ways that a service of worship can turn the focus of worship from God to the worshipers? How can you keep this from happening while you're worshipping the Lord?
3. Unless we truly and increasingly love God, we will not have the capacity or will to show His goodness to others. Explain.

Next steps – Transformation: What will you do differently from this point forward to help ensure that your worship is all about God?

The Goodness of Heaven

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why is heaven such an important resource for learning about the goodness of God?
2. What can you do to begin spending more time contemplating heaven?
3. Give some examples of how contemplating heaven can help you in showing the goodness of God to the people in your Personal Mission Field.
4. How can your time of worship be more “You, You, You” and less “I, Me, Mine”?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.