

REVELATION 11:15-18

GIVING THANKS IN HEAVEN

“The seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.’ And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying,

“‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
who is and who was,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.
The nations raged,
but your wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.’”¹

In the midst of scenes of terrifying judgements that shall be unleashed on earth dwellers, we witness a marvellous scene of praise and thanksgiving. The scene raises the question whether we can give thanks in days of trouble? Can we praise God even as He displays His wrath? The scene unfolded in our text indicates that not only can the people of God praise Him and glorify Him when He judges evil, but that we shall indeed give thanks when God at last calls the earth to account.

GOD IS MIGHTY — During the Tribulation, after God has removed His people from the earth, and awesome, terrifying judgements are poured out on earth dwellers. The judgements are delivered in three heptads, or three sets of seven judgements. The judgements grow in intensity as life becomes increasingly unbearable for those who have rejected grace and chosen to identify fully with this transient, dying world. As I review the account describing those awful days coming on the earth, I note that the raptured believers, assembled before the throne of God, are fully aware of events on the earth.

Perhaps you imagine that the redeemed saints of God would be grieved at witnessing the destruction of the earth. Perhaps you think that the people of God gathered to the Master will be sorrowful at the knowledge of the painful judgements unleashed on those whom they have known during their life on the earth. Though we are a compassionate people, and though we now grieve over the sin of our loved ones and of our friends, we will be changed into the likeness of Christ. Transformed into His likeness, we will glorify God, rejoicing in His might, and in His holiness, and in His justice. So, the scene that John unfolds before us is a scene of praise and worship.

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I do not want anyone to take away the thought that I condone rejoicing over the grief of others—not even over grief that results from justifiable divine retribution; I do not condone joy in the sorrow of others. Nevertheless, when we have been changed into Christ’s likeness, the old order will have passed away to be replaced by the new order. God’s glory and the glorious presence of the Saviour will have supplanted all thoughts of grief and sorrow. This is the meaning of the promise given those who enter into His joy, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” [REVELATION 21:4].

So, the scene set before us in the text presents the redeemed of God at worship following the Rapture. When you read of the “twenty-four elders” seated on thrones “before God,” it is a symbolic picture that speaks of the raptured people of God. There is a day, no one knows when that day will be, but there is a day when Christ will descend with a mighty cry that calls out the redeemed of this age. All that have died in the Faith will be raised, and those who are alive and remain will be transformed “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” All who believe in the mercies of Christ the Lord, who have received His sacrifice because of our sin, are destined to bear His likeness.

What a glorious promise is that which is given through the Apostle John in his first letter. “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” [1 JOHN 3:2]. We who are Christians are destined to “bear the image of the Man of Heaven” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:49]. We who are the children of the Living God are “predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son” [ROMANS 8:29]. The Lord has promised that He “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” [PHILIPPIANS 3:21]. And, according to the Word He has given us, “He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, so that through them [we] may become partakers of the divine nature” [1 PETER 1:4].

Transformed, we will glorify Him, worshipping in Heaven throughout the awful days of Tribulation that are coming on the earth. Now, we endure the toil and the strain of living godly lives to the praise of His glory in the midst of a hostile environment; then, we will rejoice in His presence. Now, we are ridiculed and rejected as unworthy of this world; then, we will truly live as children of the Great King. Now, we grieve over the sin of the lost about us; then, we will no longer be brought to tears by the wickedness of man. We will at last be fully fitted for eternity, and our love for the Saviour and for His glory will be perfected. No longer will we mourn because of the reign of evil, for He will reign supreme in our hearts and He will reign over His people.

When the people of God begin to worship and lift their voices in praise, they glorify God because of His might. The Lord has been restrained throughout history, but at last, His might and power will be revealed for all mankind to see. So, the glorious redeemed of God fall on their faces and worship Him who lives forever and ever.

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
who is and who was,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign”

The people of God are conscious of His might and power, and those on the earth will also be fully aware of His might and power. That might terrifies earth dwellers, for they have set themselves in opposition to Him. The people of God, however, rejoice in His might, for He is their Great Protector. Those who are judged are terrified, and with good reason. As I read of some of those judgements, I see the reaction of those judged.

As the sixth seal is opened, John saw “a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand’” [REVELATION 6:12-17]?

We are told of people longing to die—so intense is their suffering that they try to kill themselves only to discover that death is no longer an option. The horror of those days will drive people mad. When at last those alive in those days are compelled to acknowledge that these are not natural occurrences, they will repeatedly curse the Name of God [see REVELATION 16:9-11, 21]. The Word of God is especially poignant in stating, “They did not repent and give [God] glory” [REVELATION 16:9].

In their refusal to repent and receive mercy and in the fact that they curse God and seek death is a perverse acknowledgement of God’s might. Woven throughout the warp and woof of the Word of God is the knowledge of God’s omnipotence. The Lord is a God of might and power, and we do well to confess that glorious power now. Those saints coming out of the Tribulation, obtaining deliverance through their death at the hands of the Antichrist and his minions, stand before the throne of God, “saying, ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen’” [REVELATION 7:12].

Notice in particular that these Tribulation saints will ascribe to the Living God “power and might.” Moses, in the song of deliverance he composed when the Lord conquered the Egyptian army, spoke of God’s might when he asked of God,

“Who is like You, majestic in holiness,
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”

[EXODUS 15:11]

God is “awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders.” In other words, God does as He wishes, and as Job confessed, no one asks, “What are you doing” [JOB 9:12]? Indeed, who among men will answer back to God [see ROMANS 9:20]?

In the text, the redeemed saints in glory exult in His might when they confess, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” [REVELATION 11:15]. We who are believers, who live in anticipation of the return of our Lord Jesus Christ, will rejoice because our God has power to accomplish His will; and His will is always good. God does not give His glory to another, but He does share His glory with those who receive His mercy. In this knowledge, the people of God rejoice and give thanks for God’s mighty power.

GOD IS RIGHTEOUS — God alone is able to judge the hearts of man. Were we to attempt either to determine who is worthy to be rewarded or to assign motive to actions that are blameworthy, we would err gravely. God only is capable of judging the motives and the actions of mankind. Therefore, in Heaven, the glorified saints of God give thanks because at last:

“The nations raged,
but your wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

God is able to judge both the actions and the motives of mankind because He is just. There is no partiality with God, neither is there corruption. Moreover, there is no possibility of favouritism or error, for God is righteous.

God does not immediately judge all wickedness, but wickedness is judged. Sinners imagine that they have evaded justice, but there awaits a terrifying day for all sinners when they must give an account of their actions. The story is told of a wealthy farmer who was also a profane man. He had no regard for God or for holy matters. He boasted that he worked his land and harvested his crops deliberately on Sundays. Moreover, he ridiculed a godly neighbour, a farmer who sought the Lord and set aside the first day of the week to worship the True and Living God.

One year, after the crops were harvested, he boasted to that neighbour, “I tilled my land on Sunday. I sowed my crops on Sunday. I harvested on Sunday. This October, I had the greatest yield I have ever had. What do you say about that, Christian?”

The other man, a godly, conscientious man who endeavoured to serve God, replied in measured tones, “God doesn’t always pay His debts in October.”

Modern infidels shake their fists in the face of Holy God, daring Him to hold them accountable for their wickedness. Because God does not immediately strike them dead, they imagine that they have defied Him, proving His impotence. One must be impressed by the account of the death of Herod Agrippa I as it is recorded in the Acts.

“Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king’s chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king’s country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

“But the word of God increased and multiplied” [Acts 12:20-24].

As the chapter begins, Herod is arresting and persecuting church leaders; at the end of the chapter, he is struck down and dies. The chapter opens with James the brother of John dead and Peter imprisoned; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free and the Word of God prevailing. We must remember that God does not always delay His justice.

The persecuted and murdered saints coming out of the Great Tribulation had cried out, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth” [REVELATION 6:10]? The answer to their cry is more immediate than anyone could have thought. However, the One judging is not the “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” but rather it is the Lamb of God whose wrath is poured out of the earth. As soon as they cry, another awesome judgement falls on the earth, and earth dwellers beg for death, asking that they be hidden from “the wrath of the Lamb.”

The language of these sinners is astounding! Who would think that a lamb could be wrathful? Who would ever imagine hot anger from a little lamb? However, the Son of God gave Himself as a sacrifice for sin once; but in that day He will present Himself as the awesome and righteous God of all creation. In the days that are coming, Jesus will fulfil the word that He spoke and which is recorded by John.

“Jesus said to [Jews who were enraged at His teaching and seeking to kill Him], ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

“‘Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment’” [JOHN 6:19-29].

Daniel described the scene when the awesome judgement of mankind will take place. He writes,

“thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire.
A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.”

[DANIEL 7:9, 10]

Paul makes a statement that can only be described as terrifying to anyone who is outside of the Faith. Encouraging the Thessalonians, who were undergoing intense persecution, he promised, “God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,” [2 THESSALONIANS 1:6-9].

Warning the Athenians, Paul testified, “[God] has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead” [ACTS 17:31]. He spoke, of course, of Jesus the Son of God. John wrote of the scene when the Judge of all the universe comes to put down rebellion and take the throne for Himself. He testified that he saw, “heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war” [REVELATION 19:11].

There is a final judgement when the Great Judge will be seated and the damned will be assembled before Him. John saw that scene, as well, and wrote of what he saw. “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” [REVELATION 20:11-15].

Perhaps it is the perversity of our nature, but whenever we think of Divine Judgement, we almost invariably think of judgement of the wicked. Did you notice, however, that the redeemed of God give thanks because He rewards His servants? Throughout Scripture are promises that God is faithful and that He will richly reward those who serve Him. Though we cannot know with certainty what is involved in those rewards, we know that God has promised to remember His people.

In a previous message, we looked at “the crown of life” [JAMES 1:12]. Though there is assuredly a present aspect to this reward, there is as well a future component which is implicit in the promised crown. Paul speaks of a “crown of righteousness” which awaits him at the completion of his trials. Moreover, this particular crown is promised to “all who have loved His appearing” [2 TIMOTHY 4:7]. So, God promises to reward a life of anticipation, a life of longing for His return. Peter promises to faithful elders “the unfading crown of glory” at Christ’s return [1 PETER 5:4]. Likewise, Paul seems to allude to the souls of those won to faith through his efforts as themselves being viewed as a “crown of boasting” [1 THESSALONIANS 2:19]. Perhaps that is the same reference he makes to the Philippian Christians when we speaks of them as his “crown” [PHILIPPIANS 4:1]. What is evident is that when we build on the Foundation of Christ Jesus the Lord, there is a reward [see 1 CORINTHIANS 3:14]. When we persevere, when we faithfully serve Him, when we endeavour to bring others to faith, God sees our hearts and He will reward us, both with an inheritance [COLOSSIANS 3:24] and with His recognition.

How desperately we long for justice. We who are Christians live in anticipation of that day when all the wrongs associated with this fallen world will at last be put right. Only that Judge who is righteous and just is able to administer justice equitably. Nevertheless, we dare not imagine that He will always delay justice. Therefore, we give thanks that we know God to be just; we know Him to be the righteous Judge.

GOD IS HOLY — In justice and with mighty power, God will judge those who are identified as “the destroyers of the earth.” They are destroyers because they are utterly unlike God. They may have presented themselves as religious, even as followers of the Lord Jesus, but they are in fact destroyers. They harm the cause of Christ, bringing disrepute to His work and hindering the advance of His Kingdom, and God will at last call them to account. What should be apparent is that they do not share in the holiness of God, nor do they respect His holiness.

We Christians do not fear God because He is righteous; we know that He is righteous, and that we are not. We know that we have no righteousness of our own, but rather we stand in imputed righteousness from Christ Jesus our Lord. Neither do we fear God solely because of His might. We recognise that His might is used for His glory and for our good, and therefore we rejoice in the knowledge that He is our mighty protector. However, we fear God because He is holy. Whenever we think of God, whenever we stand in His presence, we know that we worship a God who can only be known as Other.

The Psalmist would attest of God’s righteousness,

“Your righteousness, O God,
reaches the high heavens.
You who have done great things,
O God, who is like you?”

[Psalm 71:19]

Speaking of the Lord’s might and power, the Psalmist testified,

“All my bones shall say,
‘O LORD, who is like You,
delivering the poor
from him who is too strong for him,
the poor and needy from him who robs him?’”

[PSALM 35:10]

In the song he taught the people of Israel, Moses glorified God for His holiness, asking,

“Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like You, majestic in holiness,
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”

[EXODUS 15:11]

We fear God and we serve Him because He is the Holy God, and all His attributes flow out of His holy nature.

In Heaven, we will praise God, giving Him thanks. Did you notice, however, we will not give thanks for what we have, but rather we will be giving thanks for who He is. Our gratitude toward God will be based on His character, and not on our possessions. When we gather to eat as part of the Thanksgiving ritual, we usually offer a prayer of thanksgiving. Often, if not usually, our prayer is a recitation of gratitude for what we have. I would not dissuade any of you from giving thanks for the blessings God has given in the form of possessions. However, based upon the example of thanksgiving that shall be fulfilled in Heaven, I urge you to give Him thanks for who He is, for all that He has done and for all that He is doing because of who He is.

As you give thanks to God, remember to thank Him because He is mighty, and because His power is displayed for your benefit so very often. He is your mighty protector, and He will continue to demonstrate His power for your benefit as you serve Him. Give thanks to God because He is righteous. As the Righteous God, His justice serves to give you hope, permitting you to know that your labours are not in vain. Because He is a God of righteousness, you know that He will take cognizance of your work, and He will not permit those who hinder His work to continue guiltless. Give thanks to God because He is holy, and let the knowledge of His holy nature impel you to make every effort to be holy, even as He is holy.

It is impossible to give thanks when you are not thankful; and it is doubtful that anyone can be thankful if they are not part of the Family. Though all of us are recipients of common grace, most of mankind ignores the author of liberty and goodness. Therefore, if we will truly honour God, we need to be born from above and into His Family. One does not choose to become a Christian, but rather one responds to the call of the Spirit to be a Christian. Surely, the Spirit of God is calling all who hear this message to receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ the Lord.

The Word of God instructs us that “all who ... receive [Christ], who believe[] in His Name, He [has given] the right to become children of God, who [are] born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” [JOHN 1:12, 13]. To be born of God, to be born from above, it is necessary to believe the message of life. Christ Jesus died because of our sin, taking our sin upon Himself and presenting His own life as a sacrifice for sin. However, He conquered death by resurrection from the dead. Now, God calls all mankind to believe this message and to respond through faith in the Risen, Living Son of God. This is the message of life.

The invitation of God to all people is, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That passage continues by calling each individual in clearest terms, teaching us that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Believe this message today. Receive the gift of life offered in the Son of God, and you will have a true reason for giving thanks. This is our call. This is our invitation. Amen.