


## REVELATION 11:16-19

### ETERNAL THANKSGIVING

“The twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped 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.’

“Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.”<sup>1</sup>

ne of the darkest descriptions of a culture imploding with its own arrogance is provided by the Apostle to the Gentiles in the opening words of his letter to Roman Christians. Paul writes, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” Take special note of the next verse, the first overt expression of rebellion against God and His reign. “For although they knew God, they did not honour Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” [**ROMANS 1:18-21**].

According to the Apostle, giving thanks to God is equated with honouring Him. Gratitude to God arises from the knowledge of His goodness, His grace, His mercy and His majesty. An individual that does not give thanks to God will not—indeed, cannot—honour Him as God. The individual that does not worship Him as God will never be thankful to Him as God. Worship and gratitude are intimately connected, each demanding the other.

If we fail to express gratitude toward the Creator, we demonstrate that we are incapable of worshipping Him as God. If our gratitude is reduced to mere formality, occasionally grunted out before we wolf down a meal, we have already been co-opted by the world in which we live. Certainly, expressing gratitude in prayer is both good and necessary for the child of God; however, it is not merely in speaking the words that we reveal our gratitude, but it is in the way in which we live out our lives, and especially in the worship we offer before the Living God.

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Throughout the Apocalypse, we witness worship expressing gratitude to God that is offered by redeemed saints in Heaven. How unlike worship now! It often seems that worship is a performance and that the emphasis is upon how we feel. However, the emphasis in Heaven is upon service to the Living God. In other words, in Heaven worshippers are less concerned with their performance than they are with the One who is worshipped. Now, we are concerned that our performance is not polished or that we sing off-key; there, our focus will be entirely on the Father and on the Son as we glorify them for who they are and for their mercies to us. Now, our concern is how others may judge our efforts at worship; there, our sole concern will be to honour the Living God. Stifling worship, we also stifle gratitude. Regardless of how we feel about God, if we are ungrateful, we cannot worship; if we are truly grateful, we cannot help but worship.

**THE WORSHIPPERS** — “The twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God.” The aged Apostle had been exiled to the barren Isle of Patmos. While worshipping on the Lord’s Day, John met the Risen Son of God who gave him what he describes as the Revelation of Jesus Christ [see **REVELATION 1:1, 10**]. He saw and heard the Risen Saviour, who gave Him a message for seven churches situated in the Roman Province of Asia [see **REVELATION 1:11-3:22**].

After receiving these messages, John was transported in the Spirit to Heaven, where he witnessed an unveiling of future events. The book that he wrote provides an outline of history so that no Christian need be ignorant of the plan for God either for this world or for mankind.

Shortly after John began to write of what is happening upon arriving before the throne, we are introduced to the worshippers. John writes, “I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

“And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come!’”

[**REVELATION 4:1-8**]

John saw the throne of God, and around the throne are what John identified as “four living creatures” and “twenty-four elders.” It is necessary that we identify these individuals, so that we will understand what the Beloved Disciple described. Focus first on the four living creatures. The description of the four living creatures is quite similar to angelic beings described by Ezekiel. In his visions, Ezekiel saw creatures he identified as cherubim.

As he opens his prophecy, Ezekiel describes a terrifying vision that included fearsome creatures, the likes of which he had never seen. He describes these creatures in some detail. “From the midst of [a stormy wind] came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning” [EZEKIEL 1:5-14].

At first, we are mystified by this description; it is unlike anything any of us have witnessed. It is not until we arrive at the tenth chapter of the prophecy that Ezekiel identifies these creatures he saw as cherubs. He writes of these creatures, “Every one had four faces: the first face was the face of the cherub, and the second face was a human face, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle.

“And the cherubim mounted up. These were the living creatures that I saw by the Chebar canal” [EZEKIEL 10:14, 15].

The cherubs appear to be angels created to attend to the immediate will of the Living God, and to guard His throne. Carved above the Mercy Seat on the Ark of the Covenant were two cherubs [EXODUS 25:17-22]. It pictured their immediate attendance before the LORD God, Creator of Heaven and earth. When our first parents were expelled from the Garden of Eden, God placed “the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” [GENESIS 3:24] so that man would not eat of the tree of life and live forever. Perhaps you will also remember that Satan is identified as a cherub who once guarded the throne of God [see EZEKIEL 28:14].

So, we can say with reasonable certainty that John saw the cherubim before the throne of God. However, there were also in Heaven “twenty-four elders.” John seems to assume that his readers can work out on their own who these individuals might be. Note that John describes them as elders, as seated on thrones, and as having “golden crowns on their heads.” Moreover, they fall before the throne in worship each time the cherubs “give glory and honour and praise” to God. “The twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

‘Worthy are you, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honour and power,  
for You created all things,  
and by your will they existed and were created.’”

[REVELATION 4:10, 11]

These elders reign with God, though in a lesser capacity than He, recalling the words of the Master to the Apostles, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, *you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging* the twelve tribes of Israel” [MATTHEW 19:28]. The only ones ever promised to reign with God are His redeemed people. It is relevant to note the words of the Risen Christ to the Church in Thyatira. He promised, “The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him *I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them* with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father” [REVELATION 2:26, 27]. This promise is echoed to the Laodicean Church [REVELATION 3:21]. There is a final verse that will help in identifying those who sit on the thrones. Focus on one of the final promises in the Bible. “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and *they will reign with him for a thousand years*” [REVELATION 20:6].

Those seated on the thrones are clothed in white garments, a sign of their redeemed status as demonstrated in REVELATION 19:6-8. “I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

‘Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.  
Let us rejoice and exult  
and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his Bride has made herself ready;  
it was granted her to clothe herself  
with fine linen, bright and pure’—

for the *fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*”

The Church in Sardis likewise received a promise concerning the clothing of the redeemed, “*The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments*, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels” [REVELATION 3:5]. John also saw those saved out of the Great Tribulation. Of these redeemed saints, John writes, “I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, *clothed in white robes*, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” [REVELATION 7:9]!

A final piece of evidence in identifying these saints is the fact that they are wearing “golden crowns on their heads.” The word translated “crowns” is the Greek term *stephános*—a victor’s crown. The crown of a ruler is a *diádāma*—a diadem, but the crown awarded for successful completion of an event is a *stephános*. Paul speaks of this in his final letter to Timothy: “An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules” [2 TIMOTHY 2:5].

Crowns are frequently mentioned in the New Testament. “Henceforth there is laid up for me *the crown of righteousness*, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” [2 TIMOTHY 4:8]. “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive *the crown of life*, which God has promised to those who love him” [JAMES 1:12].

What is important to note is that the crowns of the New Testament are always awarded when a responsibility has been fulfilled or a task completed. Crowns are not a sign of privilege, but a sign of proficiency. Thus, the Risen Master urges the Church in Ephesus, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you *the crown of life*” [REVELATION 2:10b].

We also know that the twenty-four elders are not angels. It is important to say this because a surprising number of theologians have argued that the twenty-four elders are angels. However, no angel is ever said to reign with the Lord God. Moreover, no angel has ever been redeemed. In fact, angels long to look into matters concerning salvation [1 PETER 1:12]. Thus, the Bible is careful to avoid even the suggestion that angels are redeemed. It is also worth noting that angels are never said to wear a victor’s crown.

The cherubs and the elders are distinct entities, and the remainder of the angels are distinguished from the elders and the cherubs. We read, “All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped 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 7:11]. So, John is careful to distinguish the elders from the angels.

Why twenty-four? What is the significance of this number? These are representative of the redeemed of this Church Age. Some suggest that the number represents that heads of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Apostles. However, it is more likely that the number twenty-four simply points to the priestly role of the redeemed saints of this Age of Grace. It was not possible that all who were priests could serve simultaneously, so David seized the initiative to create twenty-four orders within the priesthood [1 CHRONICLES 24:25; see also LUKE 1:5, 8, 9].

There is a final piece of information to encourage us in this identification. There is no mention of the redeemed on earth after chapter three. John is looking down from the place where believers will be during the time judgements are poured out on the earth. When we first see the elders, God is preparing to judge the earth in preparation for the Millennial Reign of His Son. This is a strong statement that Christ Jesus is coming for His redeemed people, and from Heaven they shall witness God pouring out awesome judgements on this unbelieving world. The text speaks of a time near the midpoint of the Great Tribulation, at the conclusion of the second heptad of judgements. From the information John has provided, it seems certain that the twenty-four elders represent the redeemed of this Church Age.

**THE WORSHIP** — Turn your attention to the worship offered to the Living God.

“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.”

Here, in our text, we witness the twenty-four elders—the redeemed of this Church Age—worshipping the Living God and the Lamb. They worship throughout the Book of Revelation, leading to the conclusion that the eternal labour of the people of God is worship. Consider just a couple of instances in the remainder of the Book. As we near the end of the book, we read of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. At this time, the elders and the cherubs worship the Living God. “The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and *worshipped God* who was seated on the throne, saying, ‘Amen. Hallelujah!’” [REVELATION 19:4]!

As the book draws to a conclusion, John writes of the eternal work of the redeemed when he says, “No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and *his servants will worship him*” [REVELATION 22:3].

We may assume that worship in Heaven is of the highest and purest sort. Without the hindrance of sin, which is ever present in this life, our motives will be pure and our worship will be pure. The angels worship God, but the worship of the redeemed differs from that of the angels. As we review the praise offered in Heaven we note some of these differences.

Of the cherubim, John writes, “And the four living creatures ... never cease to say,

‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come!’”

[REVELATION 4:8]!

The cherubs ceaselessly praise God because He is God; they especially praise Him because of His eternal nature.

John also saw the assembled multitude of angels praising God. Listen to what he wrote. “Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!’” The response of all creation is to praise the Lamb of God. “I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!’ And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ and the elders fell down and worshiped [REVELATION 5:11-14]. Again, we witness the angels worshipping by glorifying the Lamb of God because of who He is and because of His obedience to the Father. However, John is careful to note that while the cherubim agree with this, the elders fall down in worship as though they are offering unique praise.

This is in keeping with what we have witnessed earlier. We read, “Whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

‘Worthy are you, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honour and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they existed and were created!’”

[REVELATION 4:9-11]

The elders worship God because He is Creator. Note that there are no evolutionists in Heaven!

When the Lamb of God takes the scroll from the hand of the Father, He is in effect receiving the title deed to the earth. From this point, events move quickly as the Master moves to reign over the earth. What we witness here is the initial step leading to fulfilment of the prophetic word delivered by the Apostle: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” [ROMANS 8:22, 23]. As the Master takes the scroll, the twenty-four elders again worship, singing what is called “a new song”:

‘Worthy are you to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,  
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth.’”

[REVELATION 5:9, 10]

They praise the Son of God because He has redeemed people with His own blood, and made them a kingdom and priests, and because by His grace they are destined reign on the earth.

John sees a vast sea of redeemed individuals who worship the Lamb of God. This is the scene John witnessed and described. “I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” [REVELATION 7:9-12]! They are praising God and the Son of God for salvation! No angel could ever give thanks for salvation, for no angel has ever been redeemed!

At yet another point in the book, John writes of those saved out of the Great Tribulation. “I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

‘Great and amazing are your deeds,  
O Lord God the Almighty!  
Just and true are your ways,  
O King of the nations!  
Who will not fear, O Lord,  
and glorify your name?  
For you alone are holy.  
All nations will come  
and worship you,  
for your righteous acts have been revealed.’”

[REVELATION 15:2-4]

Having conquered the beast, these saints that had suffered so greatly, praise God because His righteousness is made evident both in delivering them and in judging the kingdom of the beast.

**THE WORSHIPPED** — “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.” To worship is to ascribe worth to the person or object worshipped. Worship is tantamount to assigning value. This helps us understand why money is such a temptation—it assumes the place of God. It also assists in understanding Jesus’ warning that “You cannot serve God and money” [MATTHEW 6:24b].

Near the end of the book, John received a severe rebuke from one of the holy angels when in awe he fell down before him. “Serve God!” commanded the angel [REVELATION 22:9]. Though awesome in appearance and might, the angels are servants of the Living God, just as is true of us. Indeed, the angels of God are “ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation” [HEBREWS 1:14]. Even a momentary lapse merits such an abrupt rebuke, for, as Jesus testified when He was tempted, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve” [LUKE 4:8]. When all is said and done, God alone is worthy to receive praise and glory from man.

John saw the redeemed saints worship before the throne of God, saying:

“Worthy are you, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honour and power.”

[REVELATION 4:11a]

When God on His throne held a scroll in His hand, John heard the voice of a strong angel asking “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals” [REVELATION 5:2]. Astonished that no one was able to open the scroll, John at last heard one of the elders speak, “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that He can open the scroll and its seven seals” [REVELATION 5:5]. Then, as the Lamb takes the scroll, all the redeemed, together with the cherubs, worship. The redeemed saints sing “a new song”:

“Worthy are you to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,  
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth.”

[REVELATION 5:9, 10]

As the raptured saints sing, praise bursts forth from the myriads of myriads of angels, who say, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!” Their praise induces “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” to join in a mighty anthem of praise as they shout out their praise, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!” The swelling chorus impels the cherubim to respond, “Amen!” and the redeemed saints fall down and worship [REVELATION 5:12-14]. Though on earth unbelievers curse the Son of God and many are indifferent to Him, all Heaven unites in praise to Him who alone is worthy to be praised.



In contemporary society, we tend to ascribe worth to the rich and the famous, making the assumption that they are worthy because they possess wealth or because they possess notoriety. Inevitably, we are disappointed as their character becomes evident. We ascribe worth to politicians, somehow convincing ourselves that they will usher in a better era than we have known heretofore. Again, we are always disenchanted when they inevitably compromise principle for the sake of personal advancement. We are hopeful that when we promote religious leaders as worthy that they will fulfil our aspirations for goodness and holiness. Alas, even here we are disillusioned when they are proven to be but men—flawed and broken, just as we are. Ultimately, we are compelled to acknowledge that God alone is worthy of praise. As the angels say, Christ Jesus only is worthy of power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing, for He alone is able to handle these without compromise or abuse.

This is the Thanksgiving weekend. For most Canadians it has become an opportunity for recreation, family observances, indulgence and personal time. For far too many, perhaps even for the most, what it is not is time for worship. God has blessed us richly, not the least of which blessings is the sacrifice of the Son of God because of our sin. Have you worshipped the True and Living God? Have you ascribed to Him the worth that is His alone? Does the worship you offer this week arise from a heart filled with gratitude for His goodness and His mercies?

You cannot worship God; neither can you acceptably give Him thanks, until you know Him, receiving the gift of life that He offers to all in His Son. Christ Jesus, the Son of God, gave His life as a sacrifice because of your sin. He was buried, and He conquered death, being raised from the dead on the third day. He ascended into Heaven where He is even now seated on the right hand of the Father. From thence, He offers salvation to all who are willing to receive Him as Master over their lives.

For this reason, the Word of God declares, “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.” The Father offers life to all who believe that Jesus because of *their* sin, and who believe that He rose to declare them right with the Father. God makes the offer very simple when He says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Have you received the Son of God as Master over your life? Does He reign over your life? Can you worship Him, ascribing worth to Him as is His due? Believe this message and be saved. This is our prayer for you. Amen.