

The Order of All Things

Revelation 4:1-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 8, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! 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.” ²At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! ³And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. ⁴Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; ⁶and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

“Holy, holy, holy,

the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.”

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

¹¹“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”
(Revelation 4:1-11, NRSV)

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As some of you know, I have been using A.W. Tozer’s classic book, *The Pursuit of God*, as an inspiration for preaching this fall. At the very beginning of chapter 8 he says this very obvious thing: “Order in nature depends upon right relationships.” He goes on, “...to achieve harmony each thing must be in its proper position relative to each other thing.”¹ Whether you are a slob or a neat-freak, I hope you can see that what he says here is irrefutable. Order is not inevitable if life is going to flourish.

I could use a thousand examples to make this point. Let me use fire. A couple days ago, on a cold rainy evening, I made the first fire of the season in our fireplace. Because order in our world depends upon right relationships, the fire I built inside my house was placed in proper position relative to everything else in the house. The fire needed to be *inside* the fireplace, not *outside* the fireplace. All the combustible items near the fireplace needed to be moved a safe distance away. One of us needed to be positioned in the same room as the fire to keep an eye on it. The heat from the fire went up through a chimney which is made of bricks, and the bricks are put in-between the heat and the wood. That order is important. If any of those things is out of order, the potential for disharmony, even chaos, is great.

Similarly, relationships are also to be rightly ordered. I’m a married man. That means the order of things is that I have given my devotion – my heart, my time, my body, my possessions – to my wife above all other women. That’s the order and if I mess up that order, tremendous disharmony will occur. I’m a father. That means the order of things is that until my children are independent adults, they are to live according to the boundaries their mother and I set for them. They are not in charge of the household. That’s the proper order and when it gets out of whack, as it does in many families where the children rule the roost, great disharmony, even chaos, follows. In fact, the greatest pain in life ensues when relationships become disordered. You can’t violate the order of the way things are, at least without consequences. The American writer Henry Miller once said, “The world is

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Christian Publications Inc., 1948).

not to be put in order. The world is order. It is for us to put ourselves in unison with this order.”

Here is the problem. We live in a world that refuses to put itself in unison with the created and established order of things. There are so many aspects of our world that are defiantly disordered. Fire doesn't always stay in fireplaces. Sometimes fire destroys whole neighborhoods. That could be because fire is out of order or neighborhoods are out of order, built in places or in ways they shouldn't be built. Either way, it's disordered. Many families are disordered, so much brokenness between people where there ought to be harmony. Nations should live in peace with one another. That's the proper order. They don't. They never have. The relationship between food, clean water, medicine, and housing, between all these things and people should be that every person has enough of each. That's the right order. But that relationship is way out of order. So many people don't have enough. I could go on indefinitely. Our world is terribly disordered.

But this is not how the world was designed. Read the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. When God creates, he brings order out of chaos. Genesis 1:1 reads, **“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...”**²

Everything was in chaos. But day by day God brought order. Light rightly related to darkness, sky to land, land to sea, day to night, season to season, planets, moons and sun to one another, plants and animals according to their kind and purpose, man to woman, and ultimately all creation to its Creator as the source and sustainer of all life.

And when creation was complete what did God say? **“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”**³ God called the order good, very good! Every single thing was in right relationship to every other single thing. God at the center. All things dependent on him. All needs provided. All desires fulfilled. Perfect harmony. Life unending and abundant. No pain. No death. No chaos. Only deep and enduring joy and peace in the presence of One who created out of love and sustains out of love.

But then came the fall. One way to describe what happens in Genesis 3, which isn't so much the story only of Adam and Eve but the story of us all, is that human beings deny and reject the existing order of things. Remember, the serpent whispers in the ear of the woman a lie that both she and the man decide to believe, **“You will not die [if you eat the forbidden**

fruit]; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...”⁴

Do you see the lie? Do you see the suggestion to reject the order of things? The lie is that the order is not, God above you and you subject to Him and life on His terms. No, the order is that you can be like God, setting your own terms for life. He's not in charge. You can be in charge. He doesn't know best. You can know best!

And they believe it. We believe it. We refuse to put ourselves in unison with the natural order of creation and, as a result, chaos ensues. It would be impossible to calculate the collective, historical weight of misery and suffering in this world, both personal and global, that has all been the direct or indirect result of our refusal to recognize our proper position relative to God.

We should know better. The very galaxy around us is designed - not by accident, I suspect! - to remind us of the way things truly are. We live on a planet that seems quite large to us but, relative to our galaxy, is actually quite small. And our planet, along with everything else in our galaxy, revolves not around itself, but around one thing, a giant star, a blazing ball of glowing gases that we call the sun. In fact, the gravity of the sun is what holds our solar system together. It keeps everything in its proper order, from the largest planet to the smallest particle of debris. The order of things on our own planet, from our orbit, to our seasons, to our ocean currents, to our climate, to agriculture, all of it is utterly dependent upon the sun. That's no wonder, because the sun is about 333,000 times the mass of Earth and produces the energy of 100 billion hydrogen bombs every second! The sun is the undisputed and unrivaled center of our galaxy.

But what if the sun miraculously disappeared one day, or if earth could somehow ignore its presence and influence? Take the sun out of the picture and instantly the earth would leave its orbit and head off in a straight line into space at about 67,000 miles per hour, like a rock released from a slingshot. As a result, electricity would keep us lit up as long as our power supplies lasted, but eventually darkness and cold would consume the planet. After one week the earth's average temperature would drop to freezing. Within one year the global temperature would drop to 150 degrees below zero, making our planet essentially an ice ball careering through space. Most plant, animal and human life would quickly cease to exist.⁵

⁴ Genesis 3:5 (NRSV). Emphasis mine.

⁵ See <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-would-happen-if-the-sun-disappeared-2015-8> and <https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/solar-system/sun/overview/>

² NRSV

³ Genesis 1:31 (NRSV)

I could go on, but you get the point. When our planet and the sun are not rightly ordered in relationship to one another, instant and total chaos ensues, ultimately resulting in death for all life on the planet. It is not an over-exaggeration to say that the same results eventually follow when our world, and us as a part of it, are not rightly ordered in relationship to God who is not only the creator but the moment-by-moment sustainer of life. The evidence for this is everywhere. And the endpoint of this disorder, apart from some intervention, is inevitable. Ultimately, there is no life apart from the One who is the source of all life.

The good news of the Christian gospel, of course, is that God did intervene. God entered into the chaos of our disordered world in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, to restore order. Though divine himself, Jesus became a creature, a human being, and lived, for the first time in human history, a rightly-ordered human life. In every aspect of his life Jesus was in the proper position relative to each other thing. He submitted his life to his Father, seeking the Father's will rather than his own. He submitted himself to every other human being, loving each one ahead of himself even to the point of death. And in giving himself to death, a place of chaos reserved for those who refused God's order, he overcame the power of sin and death and, by doing so, made a way for the world, and us as a part of it, to be rightly ordered again. When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, as he so often did, this is what he was talking about. Kingdom come to earth. Things on earth as they are in heaven. Right order. Everything in its proper place with God at the rightful center. This is new creation!

We read earlier from John's Revelation. I know this last book of the Bible confuses and even frightens some people. It doesn't have to. At its heart it's simply a beautiful picture that John received and recorded from God about the ultimate destiny of creation, about the day when the world will be restored at last to its proper order. Without going into great detail, I want you at least to notice the picture John is painting for us here. At the end of time this is how things will be. It's how they are coming to be even now.

At the center of all things is a throne upon which sits the King of Kings. A throne, of course, always centers authority. It's always the focal point. You never see a throne off to the side. And so all creation ultimately gathers around the throne of God. The 24 elders are there, symbolizing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the church. This is the covenant people of God from all time, including us, including all who have come to trust and worship God above all else.

Creation is there as well, not only humans but the presence of a lion, ox, and eagle teach us that creatures are also in order around the throne. And the focus of their activity, along with ours, is one thing: worship. Day and night creation sings the praises of God. God is holy! God is almighty! God is eternally the same - he was, he is, he is to come. God is worthy of *all* glory, *all* honor, *all* authority. Every atom of creation came into being through God and remains in existence because of God. He is the absolute center of all existence and one day, the day pictured in this revelation, no one will be left to dispute that reality. Colossians 1:17-17 declares, **"All things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together."**⁶

Let me make this as simple as I can make it. When Jesus calls us to be his disciples, to trust him and to follow him, he is inviting us to submit to this ultimate order of things. That's really what Christian discipleship is, me recognizing and submitting to my proper position relative to God. He is Creator; I am creature. He is Master; I am servant. He is Father; I am child. He is the Vine; I am a branch. He is the Lover; I am the beloved. And when things are properly ordered in this way, the thing that always results is worship. Worship is always what results in a human life that is rightly ordered in relation to God.

Eugene Peterson put it this way, so beautifully that I want to quote him at length:

In worship God gathers his people to himself as center...Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. We worship so that we live in response to and from this center, the living God. Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives...If there is no center, there is no circumference.⁷

Without God at the center our lives progressively descend into chaos, like the earth removed from its natural center, the sun. But once we humble ourselves to this reality of God as center, as Christ did before us in our place, then we find in the end that the reestablished order brings life. God's Word declares, **"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."**⁸ Why is that? Because - listen carefully -

⁶ Acts 17:28 puts it this way: "For in him we live and move and have our being."

⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (Harper, 1988), 60.

⁸ James 4:10 (NRSV)

at the very center of the center is love. God is the heart of all things, but at the very heart of God is only love. And so even though we give our lives away when we become his disciples, we give our lives away to One who not only desires the best for us because he loves us, but has the power to give us the best. That sets us free! As Augustine so beautifully put it in a simple prayer of praise, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” Praise God that the very center of the very center of all existence is love...abiding, unconditional, indiscriminate, fierce, determined love, made most real to us in Jesus Christ who gave his life so that we could live. Amen!

What this means is that to live as a disciple, as a Christian, is to let God help you spend your life getting things reordered. I love how Dallas Willard puts it: “The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christ-like . . . systematically and progressively rearranges his or her affairs to that end.” A.W. Tozer puts it this way, “We take God as he is and adjust our lives accordingly.”⁹

Sometimes in the New Testament Jesus was called the Cornerstone. In masonry, the cornerstone is the first stone set in the construction of a building and then all other stones are then set in reference to this one stone. The cornerstone then determines the position of the entire structure. The relationship of every other stone to every other stone is all determined by their relationship to the cornerstone. In Ephesians 2, as Paul describes the church as a building, he declares, “**Jesus Christ Himself [is] the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.**”¹⁰

What this means is that if I acknowledge Jesus as the cornerstone of my life and seek to build every aspect of my life in relationship to him as the center, every other relationship I have will in turn be rightly ordered. For example, the reason I don’t love others the way I should is that I do not know how much I have already been loved. But if I look to Christ first, I discover that he loves me and accepts me just as I am, not as I should be or want to be. That love then sets me free to love those around me with the same love. Love becomes abundant, not scarce. My rightly-ordered relationship to God helps rightly order my relationship with others.

Here’s another example. When I spend my life pursuing material things in hopes that they will satisfy

and bring security, the problem is that I am not recognizing Christ as the Cornerstone. Once I submit to Christ, however, I realize that he will provide everything needed to ultimately satisfy my soul, daily bread enough for the each day. Suddenly then my rightly-ordered relationship with God rightly orders my relationship to money and things.

In Christ my relationship to work is rightly ordered; no longer do I seek to justify myself by what I do. In Christ my relationship to injustice is rightly ordered; I hate injustice because God hates injustice and I work to see it undone. In Christ my relationship to the natural world is rightly ordered; I love this world and seek to care for it because God loves this world and cares for it. In Christ my relationship to my sin and failure is rightly ordered; instead of responding with shame and guilt I now respond in freedom and power because of his grace. In Christ even my relationship to death is rightly ordered; I no longer fear it because it has been overcome!

Augustine puts this so beautifully in *City of God*:

But living a just and holy life requires one to be capable of an objective and impartial evaluation of things: to love things, that is to say, in the right order, so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally.¹¹

In Romans 12 Paul urges believers, “Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering.”¹² In other words, life, rightly ordered, becomes worship. All of life! I go back to Tozer’s explanation of order: “to achieve harmony each thing must be in its proper position relative to each other thing.” If we are rightly related to God in Christ, then that relationship will begin to affect every other relationship in life. Yes, it’s sometimes a slow transformation, and ultimately takes a lifetime, but no part of our life will remain unaffected: our families, our brothers and sisters in the church, our enemies, strangers, our work, our rest, our money, our stuff, our time, our politics, the natural world, our past, our future. In all these things we will seek to glorify and honor God. The cornerstone is the first stone set in the construction of a structure and then all other stones are then set in reference to this one stone.

⁹ Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*.

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:20-22 (NKJV)

¹¹ Augustine, *City of God* (XV. 23)

¹² Romans 12:1 (*The Message*)

By the way, when we begin to live rightly ordered lives we will find ourselves completely out of step with most people around us who still live disordered lives. It's why the New Testament writers acknowledge that as Christians we will always feel like "aliens and strangers" in this world.¹³ Following Jesus is always, always, always counter-cultural. We swim upstream because our world is filled with restless people who will not find rest until they live into the true order of things with Christ at the center.

This should never fill us with disdain or condemnation for others, but always with love and compassion. When we see people striving after vainglory instead of giving glory to God, may we never forget that but for the grace of God that used to be us - and could be us again! Lost people, just like found people, are loved unconditionally by a God who never gives up his pursuit to restore order. Every person you know is loved at the very center of the center of existence. This is the good news we have to share with the world and we ought to share it every chance we get.

In all this I pray you will be filled with hope. Pray for me that I will be filled with hope. The Bible repeatedly, as it does in Revelation 4, gives us so many pictures of the world to come when everything is properly ordered again. It does this so that we will keep that vision in the forefront of our minds. Do not give up. Do not lose hope. Christ is coming soon to set things right, to once and for all bring order out of chaos. This is not a possible outcome; *this is the one and only inevitable outcome*, and all are invited to share in it.

Earlier in worship we confessed our faith using the opening questions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The first question, and its subsequent answer, say it all. Question: What is the chief end of humankind? Answer: To glorify God and enjoy him forever. God's rightful and permanent place is at the center of all things. Our right response to this reality is to glorify God with our lives. As we do, as things settle into order from chaos, we then are able to enjoy God, and God's creation, forever. Harmony is achieved when each thing is in its proper position relative to each other thing.

**"Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come."**

**"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,**

**for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."**

And all God's people said...Amen!

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Revelation 4:1-11 again. There is lots of rich imagery here. What specifically stands out to you?
2. In this picture of the coming Kingdom of God, what do you notice about the worship that will take place at that time? How is it similar or dissimilar to our worship in our day?
3. The scriptures often refer to Jesus as the Cornerstone (e.g. Isaiah 28:16, Ephesians 2:19-22, I Peter 2:7-8). What does this mean to you? Is Jesus the Cornerstone of your life?
4. What is one example of how we stand in relation to other people or things in this world is determined by how we stand in relation to God?
5. After listening to this message today, where do you recognize 'spiritual disorder' in your life?
6. Consider again what Augustine says about rightly-ordered love: "Living a just and holy life requires one to be capable of an objective and impartial evaluation of things: to love things, that is to say, in the right order, so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally." Is there any way that your 'loves' are out of order?
7. What is Jesus saying to you through this message? And...
8. How are you going to respond to him?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why does God want us to remember that he is the most important of all in the universe?

¹³ I Peter 2:11