

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANGELOLOGY

The Doctrine of Angels, Demons, and the Spiritual Realm

UNIT 3: THE ANGELIC ORDERS AND HIERARCHIES

Lesson 7

Cherubim, Seraphim, and Living Creatures

The Named Orders of Angelic Beings in Scripture

Key Texts: Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:18–22; Ezekiel 1:4–28; 10:1–22; Isaiah 6:1–7; Revelation 4:6–8

“Above it stood seraphim; each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.”

Isaiah 6:2, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Unit 3 of the Angelology series moves from the ministry of the angels, what they do in relation to God, to believers, and in the course of redemptive history, to the question of their orders and distinctions: what the Scriptures reveal about the specific kinds of angelic beings that populate the invisible realm. This is territory on which the history of the doctrine has often gone wrong, either by constructing elaborate hierarchies that far exceed the biblical testimony (the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition surveyed in Lesson 2) or by dismissing the question entirely as unanswerable speculation. The Reformed approach that has governed this series throughout finds the narrow path between these errors: receiving with full confidence what Scripture reveals about the angelic orders, describing it with the precision the texts warrant, and refusing to elaborate beyond what revelation has supplied.

This lesson focuses on the three classes of angelic beings that the Scriptures describe with the greatest specificity and the most vivid detail: the cherubim, the seraphim, and the living creatures of Revelation 4. These are the beings Scripture places nearest to the divine throne, the beings whose descriptions in the prophetic and apocalyptic literature are the most extended, the most symbolically dense, and the most theologically significant in the entire biblical record of the invisible realm. They are not peripheral figures in the angelology of the Bible; they are, in some respects, its most concentrated expression, beings whose very form, as Scripture presents it, is a theological statement about the God in whose presence they stand.

The pastoral and doxological aim of this lesson mirrors the aim of every lesson in this unit: not merely to convey information about remarkable creatures but to expand the worshipping imagination of the church. The cherubim at Eden, the seraphim of Isaiah's throne-room vision, and the living creatures of John's apocalyptic vision are not merely ancient religious imagery. They are Scripture's most sustained attempt to communicate, in language and symbol adequate to the task, something of the overwhelming reality of the divine glory they attend and the unceasing worship they offer. To study them is to be invited into that worship, and to discover, in the process, something about the God who is worthy of it that no purely abstract theological statement could convey.

A methodological note before we begin: all three of these classes of beings are described by Scripture in visionary and symbolic language, language that is real and revelatory but that operates according to conventions different from those of historical narrative or doctrinal proposition. The four faces of the cherubim, the six wings of the seraphim, the eyes covering the living creatures of Revelation, these are not meant to be taken as photographic descriptions of biological entities but as theologically charged images that communicate truth about their subjects through symbol and proportion rather than through literal description. This is not an evasion of the text's authority; it is the application of sound hermeneutics to the kind of literature the text actually is. The visions are real; what they describe is real; the symbolic medium through which they describe it is the medium the inspired writers chose, and it must be interpreted on its own terms.

I. The Cherubim: Guardians of the Divine Presence and Glory

The Most Consistently Described Order of Angelic Beings in the Old Testament

A. Cherubim at Eden and at the Ark

The cherubim (Hebrew: kerubim, plural of kerub) are the most frequently described class of named angelic beings in the Old Testament, appearing in contexts that consistently associate them with the immediate presence and glory of God. Their first appearance is at the gates of Eden in Genesis 3:24, where they are stationed as guardians of the way to the tree of life, a function that establishes the defining characteristic of the cherubic order: they stand at the boundary between the holy and the profane, between the divine presence and the creaturely realm, as guardians of the most sacred space in the created order.

The cherubim appear next in the design of the tabernacle, where God commanded that two golden cherubim be fashioned and placed atop the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place: “Make two cherubim of gold... at the two ends of the mercy seat... The cherubim shall have their wings spread upward, covering the mercy seat with their wings and facing one another; the faces of the cherubim are to be turned toward the mercy seat” (Exodus 25:18–20, NASB 1995). The golden cherubim atop the Ark are not decorative; they are the earthly representation of the heavenly reality that the tabernacle as a whole is designed to embody. The space between the outstretched wings of the cherubim is designated as the place where God meets with His people, the precise location from which He speaks to Moses: “There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you” (Exodus 25:22, NASB 1995).

The same symbolism governs the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, where Solomon commissioned ten golden cherubim for the Most Holy Place (1 Kings 6:23–28) and had their images woven into the veil of the temple and carved into the walls and doors. The cherubim are the symbolic guardians of the divine presence in every earthly sanctuary, an acknowledgment, worked into the very architecture of Israel’s worship, that the God who meets with His people in the sacred space is the God whose immediate presence is attended by beings of surpassing holiness and power. The tabernacle and temple are, in this sense, earthly projections of the heavenly throne room, and the cherubim who adorn them are the earthly representations of the heavenly beings who surround the divine throne in fact.

B. The Cherubim in Ezekiel’s Visions

The most extended and theologically rich description of the cherubim in all of Scripture is found in Ezekiel’s throne-chariot visions in chapters 1 and 10. The vision of Ezekiel 1 opens with a storm wind from the north, a great cloud, and flashing fire, out of which emerge four living creatures whose description taxes the resources of human language to its limits. Each had four faces (facing the four compass points simultaneously): a human face, a lion’s face, an ox’s face, and an eagle’s face. Each had four wings: two touching the wings of the adjacent creature, two covering their bodies. Beneath their wings were human hands. Their legs were straight, their feet like those of a calf, gleaming like burnished bronze. Between them were coals of fire like burning torches, and lightning flashed from the fire.

Ezekiel 10 explicitly identifies these living creatures with the cherubim: “Then I looked, and behold, in the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim something like a sapphire stone, in appearance resembling a throne, appeared above them... Now the cherubim stood on the right side of the temple when the man entered” (Ezekiel 10:1, 3, NASB 1995). The identification confirms that the living creatures of Ezekiel 1 are the same beings who were stationed at Eden and whose images adorned the Ark and the temple. What the tabernacle represented in gold and embroidery, Ezekiel saw in prophetic vision in all its overwhelming reality.

The four faces of the cherubim carry theological significance that the Reformed tradition has consistently recognized. The human face speaks of rationality and moral capacity; the lion’s face speaks of majesty and strength; the ox’s face speaks of patient service and sacrificial power; the eagle’s face speaks of swiftness, elevation, and the penetrating vision that sees from the heights. Together, the four faces represent the fullness of creaturely excellence, the composite portrait of everything in the created order that is most noble, most strong, most devoted, and most far-seeing. The cherubim are, in this symbolic register, the summation of creation’s highest qualities in service before the God who made them all.

II. The Seraphim: The Burning Ones Before the Throne

The Beings of Consuming Fire Whose Unceasing Occupation Is the Adoration of the Holy God

A. The Vision of Isaiah 6:1–7

The seraphim appear in only one passage in the entire canonical Old Testament, Isaiah 6:1–7, and that passage has already received extended attention in Lesson 4 as the paradigmatic biblical window into the worship of the heavenly realm. But the seraphim deserve focused treatment in this lesson in their character as a specific order of angelic beings, distinct from the cherubim and characterized by features that carry their own theological weight.

The Hebrew word seraphim (singular: saraph) means the burning ones or the fiery ones. The root is the word for fire or burning, the same root used for the fiery serpents of the wilderness (Numbers 21:6–8) and for the burning coals of divine judgment and purification. The seraphim of Isaiah 6 are beings of consuming fire, entities whose very nature and appearance embody the purifying, consuming holiness of the God in whose presence they stand. Their fire is not decorative; it is a theological statement about their essential character and about the character of the One they serve. They are ablaze with the reflected glory of the infinite holy God before whom they stand, and the fire of their nature is the fire of holiness rather than of destruction, though for those who approach the divine presence unworthily, the distinction is irrelevant.

Each seraph has six wings, and the distribution of those wings is theologically precise. Two wings cover the face, not because the seraphim are afraid or ashamed, but because the holiness of the God before whom they stand is so overwhelming that even beings of fire and purity cannot look upon it directly. This is reverence in its most concentrated form: not the reverence of the creature who is overwhelmed by

what it encounters but the reverence of the creature who sees most clearly and, seeing most clearly, bows most deeply. Two wings cover the feet, the classical gesture of creaturely humility before the divine majesty, the acknowledgment that even the most exalted creature is a servant, that the space before the throne is holy ground, and that the appropriate posture before infinite holiness is one of profound self-abasement. Two wings are ready for flight, the expression of instant readiness for whatever mission God might assign, the posture of a servant who has no agenda of his own and whose entire being is oriented toward the one who sends.

B. *The Theological Significance of the Seraphic Posture*

The three pairs of wings, reverence, humility, readiness, constitute together what might be called the three-fold grammar of perfect worship. The seraphim's posture is not merely a description of how they stand before the throne; it is a prescriptive picture of how every creature ought to stand before the holy God. Reverence, because the God before whom they stand is infinitely holy and infinitely other, deserving of the profound acknowledgment of His qualitative difference from every creature that His holiness demands. Humility, because the creature is always and only the creature before its Creator, the servant before the Lord, the finite before the infinite, the derived before the self-existent. Readiness, because the proper response to having met the holy God is not static contemplation but engaged, eager, instant obedience, the willingness to be sent, to go, to speak, to act at the divine commission.

Isaiah's own transformation in the vision follows precisely this three-fold pattern. First he is undone by the divine holiness: "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" (Isaiah 6:5, NASB 1995), the posture of creature-reverence before uncreated holiness. Then he receives the divine cleansing: the coal from the altar, the declaration that his guilt is removed and his sin atoned, the humility of the creature who receives everything from God and contributes nothing. And then he is sent: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?", and the prophet's response, "Here am I. Send me!" (6:8, NASB 1995), is the response of a creature made ready by the divine encounter for the divine commission. The seraphim who attend the throne have modeled, in their very posture, the journey that Isaiah travels in his vision, and that every genuine encounter with the holy God initiates in the creature who survives it.

"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory." Isaiah 6:3, NASB 1995

III. The Living Creatures of Revelation 4: The New Testament Throne Room

The Apostolic Vision of the Beings Who Surround the Throne of the Creator and the Lamb

A. *The Four Living Creatures of Revelation 4:6–8*

The living creatures (Greek: *zōa*) of Revelation 4:6–8 are the New Testament counterparts to the cherubim of Ezekiel and the seraphim of Isaiah, and their description in John's apocalyptic vision brings together elements from both Old Testament traditions in a way that reveals the continuity of the heavenly reality

across the prophetic and apostolic witnesses. “In the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come’” (Revelation 4:6–8, NASB 1995).

The four faces, lion, calf, man, flying eagle, echo the four faces of the cherubim in Ezekiel, though in Ezekiel the second face is an ox rather than a calf (a slight variation that may reflect the visionary idiom of John’s particular apocalyptic context). The six wings echo the seraphim of Isaiah 6. The omnidirectional eyes, “full of eyes in front and behind” and “around and within”, are a feature unique to the Revelation vision, and they carry obvious theological significance: these are beings for whom there is no blind spot, no hidden angle, no direction from which the divine glory might approach unseen. They are the all-seeing witnesses of the divine majesty, their entire surface of being, front, back, inside, outside, oriented toward perception and toward worship.

The trisagion they offer, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come”, is the New Testament’s expansion of the Old Testament trisagion of Isaiah 6:3. The identification of the Lord of hosts as “who was and who is and who is to come” adds the specifically eschatological dimension of the divine eternity to the holiness declaration: the God before whom the living creatures worship without ceasing is the eternal God whose holiness is not only present but past and future, not only now but always. The worship of the living creatures is thus simultaneously the worship of the Creator (Revelation 4:11, where the elders join their song) and the worship of the eternal One whose redemptive purposes encompass every moment of created time.

B. *The Relationship Between the Three Orders*

The relationship between the cherubim of Ezekiel, the seraphim of Isaiah, and the living creatures of Revelation is one of the more intriguing questions in biblical angelology. Are these three distinct orders of beings, or are they different visionary representations of a single class of heavenly beings that Scripture describes from different angles? The most theologically careful position is that the Scriptures present them as closely related, perhaps overlapping, classes of beings associated with the immediate divine presence, whose different descriptions reflect the different visionary media and redemptive-historical contexts in which the prophets and apostles received them.

Ezekiel’s vision is calibrated to the specific crisis of the Babylonian exile: the departure of the divine glory from the Jerusalem temple (Ezekiel 10–11), the demonstration that the God of Israel is not a national deity bound to a specific geography but the sovereign Lord of all nations whose throne-chariot moves where He wills. The cherubim who bear the divine throne-chariot in Ezekiel’s vision are the vehicles of divine mobility and universal sovereignty. Isaiah’s vision is calibrated to the prophetic commission: the encounter with the holy God that breaks Isaiah and remakes him as a messenger. The seraphim who surround the throne in Isaiah’s vision are the models of the three-fold posture of perfect worship and the instruments of the prophet’s cleansing. John’s vision is calibrated to the eschatological crisis of the Lamb’s

worthiness: the living creatures who combine features of both Ezekiel's cherubim and Isaiah's seraphim are the ongoing witnesses of the creation's worship and the redemption's worship, offering both simultaneously before the throne that is simultaneously the throne of the Creator and the throne of the Lamb.

IV. The Symbolism of the Descriptions: Reading Visionary Language

How to Interpret the Theologically Charged Imagery of the Throne-Room Visions

A. The Theological Function of Symbolic Description

One of the most important hermeneutical tasks in studying the cherubim, the seraphim, and the living creatures is learning to read the visionary language through which they are described with the combination of reverence and precision that the text requires. The four faces, the multiple wings, the eyes covering every surface, the appearance of fire and burnished bronze and glowing coals, these are not the elements of a field guide to the angelic fauna of the heavenly realm. They are the elements of theologically charged visionary imagery, in which symbolic form communicates theological content that discursive language alone cannot convey.

The Reformed hermeneutical tradition has consistently maintained that the visionary literature of Scripture is genuinely revelatory, that what the prophets and apostles saw in their visions corresponds to genuine realities in the invisible realm, while also acknowledging that the correspondence between the visionary medium and the heavenly reality it represents is analogical rather than photographic. Ezekiel himself seems to acknowledge this when he describes the cherubim with the repeated qualification "in the likeness" and "in appearance" (Ezekiel 1:5, 13, 14, 16, 22, 26): the visions communicate truth about the heavenly reality through images that bear a genuine resemblance to that reality without exhaustively representing it. This is not a concession to uncertainty but a feature of the visionary medium itself, a medium that is precisely suited to communicating the overwhelming, multi-dimensional, symbolically dense reality of the divine presence and its attendants.

B. The Four Faces: A Portrait of Creaturely Fullness

The four faces of the cherubim in Ezekiel, human, lion, ox, and eagle, have generated a long history of theological interpretation, most influentially in the patristic association of the four faces with the four Gospels (the man with Matthew, the lion with Mark, the ox with Luke, the eagle with John, or in the alternative arrangement of Irenaeus). Whatever the merits of the Gospel-symbol interpretation, the more fundamental theological significance of the four faces is their representation of the fullness of creaturely excellence. The human face represents rational and moral capacity; the lion represents royal majesty and fierce strength; the ox represents patient labor and sacrificial service; the eagle represents the vision that sees from the heights and the speed that descends without warning. Together, they constitute the symbolic totality of creation's most noble qualities, the composite image of everything in the created order that is most fitted for the service of the holy God.

The living creatures of Revelation 4 preserve this four-faced symbolism with one modification: the ox becomes a “calf” (Greek: *moschos*), which may represent the sacrificial dimension of service more specifically than the general ox-image of Ezekiel. The slight variation between Ezekiel and Revelation reminds us that the visionary medium is adaptive to its context, the same heavenly realities are described through slightly different symbolic registers in different prophetic and apocalyptic settings, not because the heavenly realities change but because the visionary communication is calibrated to the specific redemptive-historical and pastoral purposes of each prophetic text.

“And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty.’” **Revelation 4:8, NASB 1995**

V. The Theological Significance: Nearness to God and Consumed Worship

The Most Fundamental Truth the Cherubim, Seraphim, and Living Creatures Teach

The single most theologically significant truth that emerges from the study of the cherubim, the seraphim, and the living creatures is stated with quiet precision in the outline point for this lesson: the nearer to God, the more consumed with worship. These three orders of angelic beings are distinguished from all other created beings by a single defining characteristic: they are the beings most immediately in the divine presence, and their unceasing occupation is worship. They do not worship periodically or in response to specific occasions; they worship without ceasing, day and night, without interruption, without diminution, without the fatigue or the distraction or the competing priorities that characterize creaturely worship in every other register. Their worship is not an activity they perform; it is a state they inhabit, the permanent orientation of beings who have been consumed by the reality of the God before whom they stand.

This truth carries a profound implication for the theology of creation and worship. The beings who know God most directly, who stand nearest to the divine throne, who see most clearly the infinite holiness and beauty and majesty of the One who sits upon it, are the beings most completely absorbed in adoration. Knowledge of God, when it is genuine and direct, does not produce theological detachment or dispassionate observation; it produces worship. The seraphim do not study God and then, having satisfied their curiosity, turn to other occupations. The living creatures do not worship God at appointed times and pursue their own interests between the worship services. They worship without ceasing because the God before whom they stand is inexhaustibly worthy of worship, and the creature who sees that most clearly is the creature who worships most continuously.

The pastoral implication is searching. If the creatures who stand nearest to God are the creatures most wholly consumed in worship, then the measure of a believer’s genuine knowledge of God is not the sophistication of his theological propositions but the depth and continuity of his adoration. The Christian life at its best is not the life of a theological scholar who has accumulated correct beliefs about God; it is the life of a worshipper who has been genuinely encountered by the God the seraphim declare holy,

whose response to that encounter is the three-fold posture of the seraphim themselves, reverence before the divine holiness, humility before the divine majesty, and readiness for the divine commission, and whose daily life is increasingly shaped by the awareness that the same God before whom the living creatures cry “Holy, Holy, Holy” is the God who has, by the blood of the Lamb they also worship, drawn the believer into His own presence forever.

VI. The Caution Against Speculation: Receiving What Is Revealed

The Reformed Principle of Restraint Applied to the Study of the Named Angelic Orders

The study of the cherubim, the seraphim, and the living creatures is one of the places in the angelology series where the Calvinian principle of restraint, do not seek to know more about the angels than Scripture reveals, is most practically necessary. The richness of the symbolic descriptions in Ezekiel 1 and 10, Isaiah 6, and Revelation 4 creates a natural appetite for elaboration: what do the four faces signify beyond the four Gospels? How does the relationship between the cherubim and the seraphim fit into the nine-fold hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius? Do the eyes covering the living creatures represent God’s omniscience mediated through them, or their own unlimited perception, or something else entirely? What exactly is the “likeness of a throne” above the cherubim in Ezekiel’s vision, and how does it relate to the throne of Revelation 4?

These are not uninteresting questions, and some of them admit of theologically responsible engagement. But the characteristic danger of the study of these beings is the temptation to build an elaborate theological system on symbolic foundations that were never designed to bear that weight. The visionary descriptions of the cherubim, the seraphim, and the living creatures are given not to satisfy theological curiosity about the structure of the angelic realm but to communicate the overwhelming reality of the divine holiness and the appropriate creaturely response to it. When the study of these beings produces a more elaborate angelological taxonomy, it has likely exceeded the purposes for which the descriptions were given. When it produces a deeper awareness of the divine holiness, a more profound reverence before the God who is attended by such magnificent beings, and a more urgent desire to join their unceasing worship in the community of the church, it has fulfilled those purposes.

Calvin’s warning in Institutes I.14.4 is directly applicable here: “Let us be content with the measure of knowledge that is proper for us. And let us not try to probe the angels with overly inquisitive investigation beyond the point that Scripture allows.” The cherubim, the seraphim, and the living creatures are given to us in Scripture not as objects of extended theological investigation but as windows into a heavenly reality that is meant to enlarge our worship. We should receive them as such, with reverence, with wonder, with the humility that the creatures they portray themselves model before the God who made them, and resist the temptation to say more than they are given to communicate.

“In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.”

Isaiah 6:1, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Cherubim	Hebrew: kerubim (plural of kerub). The most frequently described named order of angelic beings in the Old Testament, consistently associated with the immediate presence and glory of God. They appear as guardians of Eden (Genesis 3:24), as the golden figures atop the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:18–22), as the living creatures who bear the divine throne-chariot in Ezekiel’s visions (Ezekiel 1; 10), and as the beings whose images adorned the tabernacle and temple. They are characterized by four faces (human, lion, ox/calf, eagle), multiple wings, and the appearance of fire and burnished metal. The name’s etymology is uncertain; some relate it to the Akkadian karibu (intercessor) or to the Semitic root for “guard” or “bless.”
Seraphim	Hebrew: seraphim (plural of saraph), from the root saraph (to burn). The burning or fiery ones. The order of angelic beings described exclusively in Isaiah 6:1–7, where they surround the divine throne, each with six wings (two covering the face, two covering the feet, two for flight), and cry the trisagion (“Holy, Holy, Holy”) without ceasing. Their fiery nature embodies the holiness of the God they serve; their posture, simultaneous reverence, humility, and readiness, models the ideal creaturely response to the divine presence. The seraphim are the instruments of Isaiah’s cleansing in the vision (6:6–7) and the models of the commissioning posture that follows it.
Living Creatures (zōa)	Greek: zōa (living beings, creatures). The term used in Revelation 4:6–8 for the four beings who surround the divine throne and worship without ceasing. Each has a different face (lion, calf, man, flying eagle), six wings, and is covered with eyes “in front and behind” and “around and within.” They combine features of both the cherubim of Ezekiel (four faces) and the seraphim of Isaiah (six wings), and their unceasing trisagion (“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty”) adds the eschatological identification “who was and who is and who is to come” to the Old Testament formula. They participate in both the Creator-worship of Revelation 4:11 and the Lamb-worship of Revelation 5:8–14.
Mercy Seat (Kapporet)	Hebrew: kapporet, from kipper (to atone, to cover). The golden lid of the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:17–22; 26:34), over which the two golden cherubim spread their wings. The mercy seat was the earthly location of the divine presence among Israel: God declared He would meet with Moses “from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim” (Exodus 25:22). On the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled blood on the mercy seat as the culminating act of the national sin offering (Leviticus 16:14–16). In Romans

Term	Definition
	3:25, Paul identifies Christ as the hilastērion (propitiation, mercy seat), the One whose blood fulfills and supersedes the mercy seat of the Mosaic economy.
Throne-Chariot (Merkabah)	Hebrew: merkabah (chariot). The technical term for the divine throne-chariot described in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1; 10), in which the four cherubim (living creatures) serve as the bearers of the divine throne that moves with the glory of God. The merkabah vision became the subject of extensive Jewish mystical speculation (Merkabah mysticism) in the Second Temple period and beyond. The Reformed tradition reads Ezekiel's throne-chariot vision as a revelation of the divine omnipresence and universal sovereignty, the God of Israel is not a national deity bound to Jerusalem but the Lord of all creation whose throne-chariot moves where He wills.
Trisagion	Greek: thrice holy. The liturgical designation for the threefold "Holy, Holy, Holy" of Isaiah 6:3, echoed in Revelation 4:8. In Isaiah, the trisagion is followed by "the whole earth is full of His glory"; in Revelation, it is expanded with "who was and who is and who is to come." The trisagion is the oldest continuous element in both Jewish and Christian liturgy and is interpreted by Reformed theology as a superlative of the superlative in biblical Hebrew idiom, not merely a threefold repetition for emphasis but a gesture toward holiness so absolute that ordinary linguistic intensifiers cannot approach it.
Shekinah	Hebrew (post-biblical): from shakan (to dwell). The term used in rabbinic literature for the divine presence that manifested itself in the glory cloud at the tabernacle and temple. Though the word shekinah does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, the reality it describes, the visible, luminous manifestation of the divine presence among His people, is pervasive in the Old Testament narrative. The cherubim are the guardians and bearers of the shekinah presence in the most sacred spaces of Israel's worship; the departure of the shekinah from the Jerusalem temple in Ezekiel 10–11 (the reverse of its original filling in Exodus 40:34–35) is the theological crisis that the throne-chariot vision of Ezekiel 1 introduces.
Visionary Idiom	The mode of communication characteristic of prophetic and apocalyptic literature, in which theological truth is conveyed through symbolic imagery, visionary sequences, and symbolic numbers, colors, and forms rather than through discursive proposition. The descriptions of the cherubim, seraphim, and living creatures in Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Revelation are written in visionary idiom, their multiple faces, wings, and omnidirectional eyes communicate theological content through symbol and proportion rather than through literal physical description. The hermeneutical task is to identify the theological content being communicated through the symbolic medium without either

Term	Definition
	dismissing the symbolism as decorative or reading it with a literalism inappropriate to the genre.
Merkabah Mysticism	A tradition of Jewish mystical speculation, flourishing approximately from the 1st–6th centuries AD, focused on Ezekiel’s throne-chariot vision (merkabah) and the ascent through the heavenly palaces (hekhalot) to the divine throne. Merkabah mysticism produced elaborate descriptions of the heavenly realm, the angelic orders, the appearance of the divine glory, and the means by which the mystic might ascend to witness these realities. The Reformed tradition regards Merkabah mysticism as a prime example of the speculative excess that results when the symbolic content of prophetic visions is treated as a detailed map of the invisible realm rather than as a theologically calibrated communication of the divine holiness and sovereignty.
Gloria in Excelsis	Latin: glory in the highest. The opening words of the angelic doxology at Bethlehem (Luke 2:14), and the name of one of the oldest non-scriptural elements of Christian liturgy. In its liturgical use (from at least the 4th century AD in Eastern Christianity, incorporated into the Western Mass in the 6th century), the Gloria in Excelsis connects the worship of the earthly church with the worship the angelic host offered at the incarnation. This connection embodies the truth of Hebrews 12:22–24: when the church worships, she joins the same angelic assembly that worshipped at the birth of the One whose death and resurrection the eucharist commemorates.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the cherubim, the seraphim, and the living creatures are real personal beings, not mythological symbols, not decorative imagery, not poetic personifications of natural forces. They are the beings that the inspired writers actually encountered in their prophetic visions, described through the symbolic medium of visionary idiom in language adequate to communicate the theological content of the encounters without exhaustively representing the beings encountered. To demythologize these beings, to reduce the cherubim to the theology of divine holiness or the seraphim to an image of creaturely reverence, discarding the beings themselves as mere vehicles of theological ideas, is to betray the testimony of the inspired witnesses.

We must also believe that the theological content communicated through these symbolic descriptions is meant to be received as genuine theological knowledge, not merely as aesthetic experience. The four faces of the cherubim communicate something true about the fullness of creaturely excellence in service of the holy God. The six wings of the seraphim communicate something true about the three-fold posture of perfect worship. The omnidirectional eyes of the living creatures communicate something true about the comprehensive, unobstructed awareness of beings who stand in the immediate divine presence. These truths are not suspended by the symbolic medium that conveys them; they are enhanced by it, communicated with a vividness and a force that discursive theological statement alone could not achieve.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the posture of the seraphim press itself upon your own practice of worship. Two wings cover the face: reverence, the acknowledgment that the God you approach is infinite holiness and deserves to be approached with the full weight of that awareness. Two wings cover the feet: humility, the acknowledgment that you are a creature before your Creator, a sinner, unlike the seraphim, who approaches the throne only because the blood of the Lamb has made it possible, and that the appropriate posture in that approach is not casual confidence but astonished gratitude. Two wings are ready for flight: readiness, the willingness to be sent, to serve, to speak, to act in whatever direction God's commission points, without agenda and without delay.

Desire the kind of worship that the living creatures model: unceasing, undivided, undistracted. They do not worship God when they feel like it or when the form of the service strikes them as particularly engaging. They worship without ceasing because the God before whom they stand is inexhaustibly worthy of ceaseless worship, and because their proximity to that God has made them incapable of anything less. The goal of the Christian life is not to achieve the literal unceasing worship of the living creatures (which belongs to a mode of existence different from the embodied, temporally structured life of human beings in this age) but to have the orientation of that worship, the fundamental God-directedness of every faculty, every activity, every day, increasingly shape the whole of one's life as an act of worship.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- **Read Ezekiel 1:1–28 and 10:1–22 side by side with Revelation 4:1–11 in a single extended sitting.** Allow the descriptions to interpenetrate: where do the cherubim and the living creatures overlap? Where do they differ? What does the comparison reveal about the continuity between the prophetic and apostolic visions of the heavenly throne room? And what does the expansion of the Ezekiel imagery in Revelation, the addition of the six wings, the omnidirectional eyes, the specific faces, communicate about the eschatological dimension of the living creatures' worship?
- **Memorize Isaiah 6:1–8.** This passage is foundational not only for the doctrine of the seraphim but for the entire biblical theology of worship, divine holiness, prophetic commission, and atonement. The structure of the passage, vision of holiness, creaturely undoing, divine cleansing, divine commission, prophetic response, is the structure of every genuine encounter with the holy God. Let the passage shape your own experience of worship and your expectations of what genuine encounter with the living God produces in those who survive it.
- **Evaluate the theology implicit in your congregation's physical worship space.** The tabernacle and temple were saturated with the imagery of the cherubim, on the veil, on the walls, on the Ark, as a constant reminder that the space of worship is the space of the divine presence attended by beings of surpassing holiness. What elements of your congregation's physical worship space, liturgical form, or corporate practice communicate the reality of the divine presence and the appropriate creaturely response to it? What elements inadvertently communicate the opposite, that worship is primarily a human activity designed for human comfort and satisfaction? How might the theology of the cherubim and seraphim inform a reformation of your congregation's approach to corporate worship?
- **Read the primary sources for the history of interpretation of these beings.** For the patristic interpretation of the four faces as Gospel symbols: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III.11.8, and Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel*. For the Pseudo-Dionysian nine-fold hierarchy: *The Celestial Hierarchy*, chapters 6–9 (available in English translation). For the Reformed corrective: Calvin, *Institutes* I.14.3–5; and John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, on the nature and orders of the angels. Reading the primary sources of the tradition, even when they have gone wrong, as Pseudo-Dionysius did, is indispensable for the pastor who must equip his congregation to navigate the history of Christian angelology with discernment.
- **Incorporate the imagery of this lesson into your practice of corporate prayer.** The next time you lead or participate in corporate prayer, open with a period of adoration shaped by Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8: the thrice-holy God, whose throne is surrounded by beings of fire and light, whose train fills the temple, who was and is and is to come. Allow the imagery of the throne room, the cherubim, the seraphim, the living creatures, the trisagion, to calibrate the register of the prayer that follows. Prayer that begins in the throne room tends to stay in the right register throughout; prayer that begins in a committee meeting tends to remain there.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before engaging the discussion questions, take stock of what you knew about the cherubim, the seraphim, and the living creatures before this lesson, and what you have learned. Which description surprised you most? Which image proved most theologically illuminating? And where do you feel the most resistance to the lesson's insistence on receiving these beings as real personal beings rather than as symbolic personifications of theological ideas?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Ezekiel 1:1–28 carefully. Identify each specific element of the cherubim's description: the number of creatures, their faces, their wings, their legs and feet, the wheels beneath them, the "expanse" above them, and the "likeness of a throne" above the expanse. What repeated qualifications does Ezekiel use in his description (phrases like "in appearance," "in the likeness")? What do these qualifications reveal about Ezekiel's own hermeneutical self-consciousness about the visionary medium through which he is describing these beings?
- Read Ezekiel 10:1–22 and identify the explicit identification of the living creatures in Ezekiel 1 with the cherubim (vv. 15, 20). What is the specific context of Ezekiel 10, what is happening to the divine glory at this point in the narrative (see Ezekiel 9–11)? How does the context of the cherubim's appearance in Ezekiel 10 (the departure of the divine glory from the temple) illuminate the theological significance of the throne-chariot imagery in Ezekiel 1?
- Read Isaiah 6:1–8 carefully. Identify the specific description of the seraphim and their activity. What is the theological significance of each pair of wings, the two covering the face, the two covering the feet, the two for flight? What is the structure of Isaiah's response to the vision, what sequence of events follows his initial vision of divine holiness (v. 1–4) through the recognition of unworthiness (v. 5), the divine cleansing (vv. 6–7), the divine commission (v. 8a), and the prophetic response (v. 8b)? How does the three-fold posture of the seraphim model this sequence?
- Read Revelation 4:1–11 carefully. Identify the specific description of the living creatures. How do they resemble the cherubim of Ezekiel? How do they resemble the seraphim of Isaiah? What new elements does the Revelation description add that are not present in either Ezekiel or Isaiah? What is the content of their worship, and how does it relate to the content of the elders' worship in verses 10–11?
- Read Exodus 25:10–22 and consider the design of the Ark of the Covenant and its cherubim. What specific instructions does God give about the placement, posture, and faces of the golden cherubim? What is the theological significance of the designation of the space between the cherubim's wings as the meeting place of God and Moses? How does the Ark's design embody the theological principle that the divine presence is always attended by the cherubic guardians?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the four faces of the cherubim represent “the fullness of creaturely excellence” in service of the holy God. Do you find this interpretation convincing? What are its exegetical grounds? What other interpretations of the four faces have been proposed in the history of Christian theology (the four Gospels, the four cardinal virtues, the four aspects of Christ’s work)? What hermeneutical principle helps determine which interpretation is most faithful to the text’s purposes?
- The lesson argues that the three pairs of the seraphim’s wings represent “the three-fold grammar of perfect worship”: reverence, humility, and readiness. Is this interpretation reading too much into the symbolism, or is it a legitimate theological inference from the postures the wings describe? How does the structure of Isaiah’s own experience in the vision, awe, cleansing, commission, support or complicate this interpretation?
- The lesson proposes that the cherubim, seraphim, and living creatures may be “closely related, perhaps overlapping, classes of beings” rather than three strictly distinct orders. What are the exegetical arguments for and against identifying them as the same class of beings described through different visionary media? Does it matter, theologically and practically, whether they are the same class of beings or three distinct orders? How does the lesson’s answer to this question exemplify the Reformed principle of holding real doctrinal conviction alongside appropriate epistemic humility?
- The lesson identifies “the nearer to God, the more consumed with worship” as the single most significant theological truth emerging from the study of these beings. Evaluate this claim. Is it universally true within the biblical testimony, or are there counterexamples (beings close to God who are not consumed with worship)? How does the truth of this claim relate to the theological question of whether the seraphim’s unceasing worship is an act of the will or simply a permanent state of being?
- The lesson closes with a caution against speculation, citing Calvin’s warning against “overly inquisitive investigation” of the angels. At what point does legitimate theological inquiry into the cherubim, seraphim, and living creatures cross the line into the speculation Calvin warns against? What are the signs that a theological investigation of these beings has served its legitimate purpose (enlarging worship) versus having exceeded it (satisfying curiosity)? Is the line always clear, or does it require ongoing pastoral and theological judgment?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson suggests that the measure of a believer’s genuine knowledge of God is not the sophistication of his theological propositions but the depth and continuity of his adoration. Do you agree with this claim? How does it qualify, challenge, or complement the Reformed tradition’s emphasis on the importance of right doctrine? Is there a tension between theological precision and doxological depth, or are they natural allies? Where do you see this tension, if it exists, in your own theological formation and ministry practice?
- The seraphim’s three-fold posture, reverence, humility, readiness, is presented as a prescriptive model of how every creature ought to stand before the holy God. Evaluate your own current practice of worship against each element of this three-fold posture. In which of the three are

you strongest? In which are you weakest? And what specific change in your preparation for, participation in, or response to corporate and personal worship would most directly address your weakest area?

- The lesson observes that the tabernacle and temple were saturated with cherubic imagery as a constant reminder that worship takes place in the space of the divine presence. Most Protestant worship spaces have deliberately stripped away such imagery. What do you gain and what do you lose from this simplicity? Does the absence of symbolic imagery make Protestant worship less or more susceptible to the casual familiarity that the lesson warns against? What non-architectural means might a Reformed congregation employ to cultivate the sense of the divine presence that the cherubic imagery of the temple was designed to maintain?
- The living creatures of Revelation 4 worship “day and night” without ceasing. The lesson proposes that the Christian life aspires not to literal unceasing worship (which belongs to a different mode of existence) but to the “fundamental God-directedness of every faculty, every activity, every day.” What would your daily life look like if every activity, work, rest, conversation, recreation, were offered as worship in this sense? Identify one specific area of your daily life that is most resistant to this orientation and one specific practice that might begin to reorient it.
- This lesson introduces Unit 3 of the Angelology series. Looking forward to Lesson 8, the archangels, and the Pauline categories of thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities, what question does this lesson leave you with that you most hope Lesson 8 will address? And how has the introduction of the named angelic orders in this lesson changed the way you will approach the more general Pauline language of angelic authority in the next lesson?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time with a slow, meditative reading of Isaiah 6:1–8 and Revelation 4:1–11, allowing the two throne-room visions to be held together in the mind and the imagination simultaneously. Read Isaiah 6 as the encounter with holiness that undoes the creature and remakes it; read Revelation 4 as the cosmic liturgy in which creation's highest beings offer the worship that the Creator's majesty perpetually calls forth. Allow the two visions to do what they were given to do: not merely to inform the mind about remarkable beings, but to enlarge the worshipping imagination of the heart until it begins to grasp, however imperfectly, however partially, however inadequately, the overwhelming reality of the God before whom the seraphim veil their faces and the living creatures are covered with eyes.

Begin your prayer in the register of the trisagion. The holy God, infinitely, incomparably, absolutely holy, is the God to whom you are praying. Not the comfortable deity of popular religiosity, not the therapeutic God who exists to support human flourishing, not the benign cosmic backdrop to human spiritual experience, but the God before whose presence the seraphim, the most holy of all created beings, must cover their faces. Let this awareness press upon your prayer until it reshapes its tone, its register, and the posture of your heart: from casual petition toward reverent approach, from the assumption of familiarity toward the astonishment of grace that a holy God has made Himself accessible to sinful creatures through the blood of the Lamb the living creatures worship.

Pray through the three-fold posture of the seraphim as a structure for the prayer itself. Begin with the two wings that cover the face, reverence: spend time in adoration of the divine holiness, allowing the reality of God's infinite qualitative difference from every creature to press upon your mind and heart. Name His holiness specifically: His moral perfection, His absolute truthfulness, His unwavering justice, His righteous anger at all that is impure, and His infinite beauty as the only perfectly holy Being in existence. Then the two wings that cover the feet, humility: move into confession, the honest, specific, unhurried acknowledgment of the ways in which your own life falls short of the holiness that God's presence demands. Receive the assurance of cleansing through the blood of the Lamb whose new song the living creatures sing in Revelation 5. And then the two wings ready for flight, readiness: intercession and commitment. Pray for the specific missions God has placed before you, in your congregation, in your family, in your ministry, with the open-handed readiness of a servant who has no agenda of his own and whose entire response to the divine commission is: "Here am I. Send me."

Pray for the corporate worship of your congregation with specific attention to the questions this lesson has raised. Ask God to grant your congregation the awareness that every Sunday gathering is a gathering in the presence of the same holy God before whom the seraphim veil their faces, the awareness that transforms casual attendance into reverent participation, habitual religious routine into genuine encounter with the living God. Pray for your congregation's preachers and worship leaders: that they would lead God's people into the presence of the holy God with the three-fold posture of the seraphim, reverently, humbly, ready to be sent. And pray for yourself: that the knowledge of the cherubim, the

seraphim, and the living creatures gained in this lesson would not remain merely theological information but would deepen, week by week, the quality and the character of your own worship.

Close with the doxology of Revelation 4:11, spoken not as a liturgical formula but as the genuine, personal, heart-engaged ascription of worth to the One who created all things: “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.” Say it slowly. Mean it entirely. And let it be the posture from which you rise to go about the work to which the living God has commissioned you.

“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

Revelation 4:11, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 3:22–24; Exodus 25:10–22; Ezekiel 1:1–28; 10:1–22; Isaiah 6:1–8; Revelation 4:1–11; 5:1–14*

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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