

The Reorienting Power of Worship

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] I used to work in the mental health world, some of you know, and one of the things that you're trained to do in the mental health world is to do cognitive assessments.

That means you're assessing somebody to see if they're alert and oriented times four. You want to know if a person knows who they are, if they know where they are, if they know what time it is, day, month, year, and if they understand the situation, if they understand what has happened to them and their circumstances.

It's very important to make sure that your patient is alert and oriented times four, because if you send somebody out into the world and they're disoriented, normally bad things are going to happen. It's also indicative of the fact that there's probably something not right with them, and that issue or problem needs to be dealt with. More recently, I've been thinking about this in terms of my life, and I've been thinking about what it would be like if God were to give me that assessment.

If God were to ask me, do you really understand who you are? Do you really know where you are? Do you really understand the time that you're living in?

[1 : 16] Do you accurately understand and perceive your circumstances and the situation that you're in? And I wonder would I pass that assessment?

Because the truth is, life can be profoundly disorienting. I realize that my life can be profoundly disorienting. I can be in an argument with my wife, and I can be so focused on justifying myself or on proving my point that I will say and do things that hurt her, that are unloving in the process.

Or I can sometimes tend to become overly focused on very small problems such that they kind of take over my life, and at the same time I can be minimizing or denying some massive problem that really needs my attention, but I just don't feel like dealing with it.

I can read the news, and I can read the stories at the top of my news feed, and I can start to hear about all of the disaster and the struggle and all of the trials around the world, and I can just start to feel like all of this is hopeless, like the world is falling apart, and I can just really get into this place of despair.

And you know, if I'm in my right mind, I'm not going to do these things. I'm not going to think these things. But I think the point is, I'm not sure how often we are in our right mind, because I think life can be profoundly disorienting.

[2 : 45] If you look at John, the author of the book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, the Apostle John is living in exile, and he's on the Isle of Patmos, and he has faced persecution and suffering, and his church has faced persecution and suffering, and so it's not a stretch to think he's probably feeling pretty disoriented, because it's very easy to lose perspective in circumstances like those.

And so what we're going to look at tonight is how God ministers to John and through him to us. Because when God comes to John, he says, you're disoriented, you're trying to make sense of all of this, the first thing that you need to do is to come and worship.

And he invites him to a heavenly worship service. And so what we're going to see as we look at Revelation chapter 4 and 5, these amazing chapters, is we're going to see this truth, that life can be profoundly disorienting.

And so we need worship to reorient us. God would be worthy of worship, and that would be reason enough to gather. But beyond that, we need worship, because worship is how God reorients us to what is real and true and important and meaningful in this world and what is not.

So we're going to look at three examples in these chapters in Revelation of how worship reorients us. Let's pray. Lord, we recognize as I stand here and even under some of the imagery on the cross behind me, Lord, that this is a beautiful and amazing description of heavenly worship.

[4 : 34] And it is ongoing and eternal. And we recognize that when we gather here, we are joining into a worship that is already underway, that we are joining our voices with angels and archangels.

And so we pray that as we are gathered around Your Word, You would reorient our hearts toward You in all of the ways that only You can do. We pray this in Your Son's holy name.

Amen. So worship reorients us in three ways. The first way that we see in Revelation chapter 4 is worship does this by re-centering us on God's throne.

It re-centers us on God's throne. Verse 2, it says, So here's John.

He's on the Isle of Patmos. A door opens in the heavens in this amazing vision. The Spirit takes John up into this door. He comes into the heavenly sanctuary where liturgical worship is underway.

[5 : 36] And the first thing that jumps out to John is the throne. And more than that, if you read the description, you recognize that all of the heavenly creatures, all the living creatures, everything there is oriented toward that throne.

Everything is centered on the throne. And this is the throne of thrones. Later in the chapter, you could almost translate the word, the enthronement.

It's not necessarily the one who sits on the throne. It's the enthronement. Meaning, this is the essence of all thrones. All kingly authority, all government authority, all human authority is derived from this throne.

It is an echo or even an invitation of this throne. This is the true seat of authority in the world. And everything is centered on it. And so here's what this is showing us as we need to be reoriented.

This is how life is meant to work. This is how life is meant to work. So think of a solar system. These massive planetary bodies that are flying through space at unimaginable speed.

[6 : 50] And when we take measurements of the solar system, all of these massive, disparate, seemingly disconnected bodies are moving with beauty and order and exact precision.

And you ask, well, how is such a thing possible? And it's only possible because everything in our solar system is oriented around the same central object, which is the sun.

If it weren't for the sun, if it weren't for that shared orbit, there would be chaos. If you were to take the sun away, everything would fly out of orbit. Planets would start crashing into each other.

It would be total chaos. And this is the reason that human beings are always crashing into each other. This is the reason that our lives don't work and that the world doesn't work the way it should. It's because we've lost our orbit. And so instead of order and beauty and precision, there is always a certain amount of chaos.

[7 : 53] And the truth is, if you look at your own heart, as I've been looking at my heart, you realize that our orbit, the thing around which we orbit, is constantly changing.

It's constantly in flux. Now, I know some of you, even if you don't admit it, you're going to go home tonight and watch Game of Thrones. Right? Game of Thrones. It's a great, popular, huge TV show. Not necessarily recommending the show.

Good storytelling. Yada, yada. But essentially, Game of Thrones is about all of these various characters who are all vying for the throne.

They all want to sit on the Iron Throne. And if you'll pardon the analogy, our lives are like a great Game of Thrones. Because there are all of these things, all of these people, all of these issues, all of these feelings, that are all vying for the throne.

They all want to sit on the throne of our lives. Right? So sometimes when I look at my own life, I recognize that my needs sometimes occupy the throne. And whatever that thing is, you're going to orbit around the thing.

[8 : 54] It's going to take over. It's going to start to determine and shape and define you. And so if my needs take the throne, it means that your needs aren't nearly as important to me. Right?

Sometimes it's my fear. Fear and anxiety, it has a way of just taking over. And if you let fear take the throne, then you begin to see everything through the lens of that fear.

You begin to operate and act out of fear. You make decisions that are fear-driven. Sometimes it's just a need for personal comfort and escape.

That takes the throne. Sometimes it's a desire to be affirmed and recognized. Sometimes it's a desire to indulge anger or resentment.

Whatever it is, the throne of our hearts is a throne that is constantly under contention. And we need to recognize that that is how our heart works.

[9 : 56] If we recognize the truth of our hearts, then we recognize why it's so important that we gather and do what we're doing right now. It's why it's vital. It's because we need to be re-centered on the throne of God.

We need to be reminded. I need to be reminded. I need to be reminded that my life doesn't work when I'm the center of it. Because I will leave and I will go home tonight and I will immediately forget it.

And I need to be reminded again and again and again. I need Jesus to displace me as the center of my life. We come here because we need a kind of Copernican revolution of the heart.

We need whatever pretender, whatever steward is sitting on the throne ejected. Because we need the rightful king to sit at the center of our lives.

And when that happens, it's just like our solar system. Think about how do we see all of the planets and moons and objects that are in the solar system.

[10 : 58] Well, it's because they're all cast in the light of the sun. And what you realize is when Jesus re-centers on the throne in the center of your life, what happens is that you begin to see all of those other things in the light of Christ.

That fear that used to be so overarching and so overwhelming, you begin to see it in the light of Christ. It's no longer at the center. It's in orbit. And you say, how could I ever have been so overtaken by that, felt so hopeless?

Your needs that felt so massive, you see them relative to other needs in the light of Christ. And you see, how could I have been so focused on myself? And it begins to reorient you.

By the way, this is why it is so important that you marry somebody who shares your faith. People ask, is it a sin in the Bible to marry somebody of a different faith?

And I would just say this, if you're asking it like that, you're missing the point. If you understand what marriage is, if you understand what Christianity is, and what both call us to, then you recognize that marriage is already extraordinarily difficult.

[12 : 12] When you have to figure out how to spend your money and how to raise your kids and how to resolve the inevitable conflict that you'll face, how to deal with the deep-seated sin that emerges in that kind of intimate, vulnerable relationship, when you have to deal with unexpected tragedies and hardships, when you have to...

This is already hard stuff. But if you share the same orbit, if you share the same orientation toward the same center point, if you have a common vision for life and a common set of priorities and you agree on what's most important, it's going to be hard, but it's going to be doable because you have a common aim.

But if you're starting out with two different orbits, it's going to be exponentially harder because try as you might, you have two different points of reference and invariably you will crash into each other again and again and again.

So it's vital that we have a common center around which we orbit. Right? So this is the first way we need to be reoriented. We need to be re-centered on God's throne at the very center of our lives.

But this is not all we need. We also need to be refocused on God's Word. And the two go together.

[13 : 34] I think one of the most disorienting things in life, certainly in my life, is suffering. How do you deal with your own suffering? How do you deal with the suffering of the people that you love?

And I think the reason that suffering is so disorienting is because it always raises the question of why. Why me? Why this? Why now? And to be totally honest, there are not that many good answers out there that are comprehensive enough to satisfy that question.

And so we struggle with how to make sense of all the suffering in our lives. It can be profoundly disorienting and it can sort of lead you to begin to see all of life as being meaningless and random. You know, you start to give in to that view of reality articulated by Richard Dawkins where he says, there is no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

That's very disorienting. And I think it's possible that John was maybe starting to go in that direction as he sat there on Patmos in light of his own suffering and persecution.

[14 : 47] You know, Jesus rose. He overcame death. Somehow I thought it would be better than this. You know, why am I here? And then he's taken up into this heavenly worship service.

He sees the throne and then he turns, verse 1 in chapter 5, it says, then I saw in the right hand of him who is seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back sealed with seven seals.

Now normally, if you were writing a scroll, you would only write on the front side and then you would roll it up to protect the writing. The only reason you would ever write on all the front and all the back of a scroll is if you had a lot to write down and you only had one scroll and so you're going to use every available square inch of that parchment and this scroll is absolutely covered in writing. And the reason that it's packed is because this is all of history. It's all been written down. Everything, every detail, every jot and tittle, every aspect of every life, it's all here. It's all been written by the author of history and it was all written down before time even began. So this is the final word on history.

[15:59] It is history. Past, present, and future written down by the one who was and is and is to come. This is God's plan. The plan that is unfolding right now in our lives and in the world.

And so when John sees the scroll, when we see the scroll, we realize something very important. It refocuses us on the idea, on the truth that this life is not meaningless.

It's not nihilistic. It's not a world of pitiless indifference. Indifference that everything has a purpose. Everything has meaning. Every tier will be accounted for.

One day, even though it's not today, one day it will make sense when we get to the end of the scroll and we look back, we'll say, oh, that's how that fit in. That's why this had to happen the way it did. It's not now, but one day it will be. It's all been written down. It's all there. What this also means for you is that there is a purpose for you in the world.

[17:04] There's a purpose for your life. There's a meaning and a divine intentionality behind you being here wired as you are wired, gifted as you are gifted.

There's a part that you play. You're a thread in the tapestry. And you will never fully understand who you are unless you understand how you connect to that purpose.

And we'll never fully understand that purpose unless we open the scroll. And this is why we gather every week for worship. We don't get the whole scroll.

What God has given us in the form of the scripture is that part of the scroll that He has revealed to us. And it is everything that we need to know to be reconciled to Him and to join in that great divine unfolding story.

He says, this is what you need to become a part of all that I'm doing. It's all right here. And so we come together not to just hear my latest thoughts or sources of inspiration or funny anecdotes.

[18:12] I mean, if you want to hear that, just buy me a drink and I'll share it with you as much as you want. That's not why we're here. We're here to open scripture to be refocused on God's unfolding purposes in the world and to ask, how does this speak to me?

How am I invited in to what God is doing? That's what it's all about. So in worship, we open God's Word together. The ministry of the Word, the ministry of preaching is meant to connect us in our moment to the eternal purposes of God.

So every week, we need to be re-centered on God's throne. We also need to be refocused on God's Word. And yet, there's a problem.

A problem emerges when we begin to open God's Word. We begin to read what it says because at first, it looks like good news. You begin to read scripture and you realize, and this is laid out in the book of Revelation, in fact.

We'll get to it later in this series that God's plan is ultimately to restore this world, to put all things right, to bring justice and peace, to heal everything that's been broken, to wipe away every tear.

[19:28] And you say, well, that's really good news. But in order to do that, God has to judge the world. The only way to put the world right is to bring perfect justice, which means all wrongs have to be punished, all sin has to be dealt with, not just the big stuff, but also the seemingly small stuff, including our own stuff.

And so, here's really the problem that we began to face. It's a problem that emerges all through the Old Testament as the Old Testament scholars try to reconcile, on the one hand, God's desire for justice, and on the other hand, God's commitment to mercy.

How do you have justice and mercy? If God doesn't bring perfect justice, what hope is there for the world?

If God does bring perfect justice, then what hope is there for me, for you? You might say, well, why doesn't God just punish the big stuff, the really bad people, but overlook me?

I mean, I'm doing the best I can. I'm a pastor. I'm trying hard, living a pretty good life. You realize that if God were to do that, that's not perfect justice. That's divine favoritism. A God who practices

divine favoritism is not the kind of God we need to fix this world.

[20 : 53] And so, we're left in this quandary. How do we resolve this issue? How do you bring together justice and mercy, give hope to the world and hope to people like us? This brings us to the final way that worship reorients us because it reminds us of God's redemption and how God resolves that tension.

When John first sees the scroll, it is sealed. And there's an angel who says, who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals? He's saying, we need a champion.

We need a hero. We need somebody who is worthy enough to open the scroll. And John begins to weep because he realizes that unless this scroll is opened, God's unfolding plan will not be enacted.

That it all hinges on this champion. It all hinges on the one who is worthy. And so, John weeps because he thinks justice may never come, peace may never come, suffering may never be ended, the world cannot be put right until this champion comes.

And then something rather bizarre happens. And by the way, get used to that in Revelation. I'm going to say it about every week. Something bizarre happens. Verse 5, One of the elders said to me, Weep no more.

[22 : 15] Behold, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals. Now this is the interesting thing.

When John looks, he expects to see a conquering lion. But when he turns, he doesn't see a lion. He sees a lamb. Verse 6, I saw a lamb standing as though it had been slain.

Now in ancient literature, lions are symbols of strength and royalty. Lambs, on the other hand, are symbols of helplessness and vulnerability.

And so the question becomes, which is it? This champion has arrived. Is it a ferocious lion? Or is he a feeble lamb? And of course, the good news of the gospel is that he is both at the same time.

He's both. And this is how God resolves this tension between justice and mercy. This is how God can bring hope to the world and also bring hope to people like us.

[23 : 26] Because the lion is the lamb. Jesus is the judge and yet he allowed himself to be judged. Jesus is the conqueror and yet he allowed himself to be conquered.

Jesus is the king and yet his coronation was a crucifixion. The lion is the lamb. And this is the great hope of the world that Jesus defeated sin and death through his death.

And of course, you realize what this is, don't you? In Revelation chapter 5, you realize what's happening here. This is the ascension. This is the ascension of Christ.

We confess it every week in the creed. Right? So in Acts chapter 1, Jesus, as the risen Christ, appears to his disciples and he promises the Holy Spirit.

He commissions them for their mission to the world and then he ascends to the throne of heaven and in that chapter, Jesus ascends up and the disciples look and he's lost from sight.

[24 : 29] And then we come to Revelation chapter 5 and what we're seeing here is this is the ascension from the perspective of heaven. Everybody's gathered. They're oriented toward the throne. They're waiting. They're worshipping.

But at this point, there's been no singing. They're just speaking what they're saying. And then the Lamb arrives and all the heavens break out in song. They all begin to sing.

And it's beautiful because Christ has ascended to take the throne. The Lion who is the Lamb has conquered. And so all the heavens rejoice. Myriads upon myriads.

Choirs of angels. Millions upon millions of heavenly beings. And all of creation begins to worship the Lamb. Verse 9. Worthy are you to take the scroll to open its seals.

For you were slain and by your blood you ransomed, you purchased people for God from every tribe, language, and people, and nation.

[25 : 25] And you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God. And they shall reign on the earth. This is a song of global redemption.

And it's a song of lordship. Christ intends to share His throne with the saints, with His people. And of course this redemption accomplished by Jesus, the Lion Lamb, is powerfully reorienting.

It's powerfully reorienting for the heart. Because if I can be totally honest, sometimes I can tend to be smug. And I can tend to be a bit of a snob.

And it's very easy for me to begin to look down on people for all kinds of reasons. And then I come to worship. And I am reminded that as smart as I might think I am, as successful or as intelligent or

whatever, I might think I am, it took nothing less than the death of the Son of God to save me. The lion had to become a slain lamb to give me hope. And it reminds me who I really am. There are other times when I am very prone to self-criticism and self-hatred, self-loathing.

[26 : 49] I can be a horrendous critic to myself. And then I come to worship. And I'm reminded that it was the great delight of God of this ferocious lion to become a vulnerable, helpless lamb, to give himself up, to give away all of his power and glory, not just to save me or to give me a fighting chance, but so that I could share his throne.

I've been a pastor almost 12 years. I still can't fully understand what that means. Probably never will. But I'll tell you what it means for my heart. Who am I to judge or condemn or to criticize a person like that who will one day share the throne in and with Christ, who is a kingdom of priests and a holy nation?

So in these ways, we come to see ourselves more and more as we gather for worship, as God sees us. we see ourselves as we truly are in Him.

So you know, life can be very disorienting and this is why we need to gather every week and worship like we're doing right now. It's why it's so important.

And so this not only means that this should be a high priority for all of us, but it means that even when you're traveling, which a lot of you, I understand, you travel for work and that's just a part of the way your life is and I totally get that.

[28 : 24] But I would strongly encourage you if you're on the road to find a way to worship with Christians in a gospel-centered church whenever and wherever you can because our hearts are wayward and they continually need to be reoriented in the ways that we've talked about this evening.

We need to be re-centered on God's throne again and again and again and all of the pretenders to the throne need to be cast out. We need to be refocused on God's word and away from all of the confusion and nihilism in our society and we need to be reminded of our redemption so that we come to see ourselves more and more as we truly are in Christ.

So I'm glad that we're here together. Let's pray.